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THE END OF THE KNOWN WORLD

by

Madeline Thomas

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English

Approved:

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Logan, Utah

2022

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ABSTRACT

The End of the Known World

by

Madeline Thomas, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2022

Major Professor: Dr. Benjamin Gunsberg
Department: English

This thesis forms the foundation for a poetry chapbook infused with Norse mythology and pain. It builds itself on two distinct strands. In the first, I reclaim the story of Hel, goddess of death, and attempt to humanize a figure historically branded as monstrous. Her life forms a narrative line through the collection that attempts to capture the whimsy and horror in myth. Intertwined with the goddess are poems centered around a contemporary speaker who suffers from chronic migraine, an autoimmune disease, unexplained tachycardia, and OCD. The poems in this personal strand vary heavily in both form and content but work to target the emotional core of chronic illness and pain. As Hel is known to be half corpse, it is shared suffering that bridges both women across time. Through this chapbook, I hope to be able to represent the pain inherent in life, but also the life we claim despite it.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

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This thesis forms the foundation for a poetry chapbook infused with Norse mythology and pain. It builds itself on two distinct strands. In the first, I reclaim the story of Hel, goddess of death, and attempt to humanize a figure historically branded as monstrous. Her life forms a narrative line through the collection that attempts to capture the whimsy and horror in myth. Intertwined with the goddess are poems centered around a contemporary speaker who suffers from chronic migraine, an autoimmune disease, unexplained tachycardia, and OCD. The poems in this personal strand vary heavily in both form and content but work to target the emotional core of chronic illness and pain. As Hel is known to be half corpse, it is shared suffering that bridges both women across time. Through this chapbook, I hope to be able to represent the pain inherent in life, but also the life we claim despite it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I give special thanks to both Shanan Ballam and Dr. Ben Gunsberg for their mentorship in this process and all the work they did to help this collection take shape. Both pushed me to discover and hone my writing identity in unique and vital ways, and both are integral to the poems I produced. Additionally, I'd like to thank Dr. Christine Cooper-Rompato for introducing me to Hel and seeing us both through this process, and to Dr. Michael Sowder for his willingness to jump into this project and help guide it to the end.

I would also like to thank my family for all they did to keep me sane in the last year as I juggled heaping diagnoses and writing simultaneously. I must mention my fellow writers, graduate students, and colleagues at Utah State University—community is a lifeline in the flurries of stress, and I couldn't have found myself in a better one.

Madeline Thomas

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Louise Glück's *Averno* paints a poetic story of two figures: a contemporary speaker entrenched in the lamentations of life, and the Greek goddess of the underworld, Persephone, entrenched in the lamentations of a life defined by death. In a tone of introspective weight, Glück utilizes ancient myth to explore modern realities related to identity, daughterhood, and the navigation of life with constant knowledge of looming death. In *Averno*, Glück molds Persephone's story into contemporary speculation on the thoughts of a goddess who is often ignored as a seemingly passive figure in the escapades of an overbearing mother and conniving husband. *Averno* refuses to perpetuate this narrative as it gives Persephone a distinct voice and employs a modern speaker to comment on the notions of will and choice in the well-known myth, which result in an argument more complex than the binary good and evil so often employed in storytelling. Instead of a beaming daughter stolen from the embrace of a divine mother, we see a figure torn between the prison they faced in life and the new possibilities awaiting them in the realm of death. In the poem "Persephone the Wanderer," Glück resists the human urge to villainize death as the opposite to life, in such lines as "My soul / shattered with the strain / of trying to belong to earth —" (19). In this line and throughout the poem, Persephone shows as much discomfort in the world of the living as in the world of the dead, to distort the notion of life as a superior existence. Throughout the collection, Glück explores the notion of life free from necrotic fear of death, with consistent pushes to readers to reconsider what is most valuable in our existence. The titular poem "Averno" heavily contemplates death as an inevitability of life. Glück writes, "On one

side, the soul wanders. / On the other, human beings living in fear. / In between, the pit of disappearance” (64). Glück argues in these lines that the harm death causes in life isn’t that it exists, but that waiting for its arrival interrupts our lives with anxiety and fear that lives in us as long as our breath continues to flow. In this passage death also maintains its bitterness, however, as we separate the living and the dead with ominous “disappearance.” As a collection, *Averno* rejects the primary narrative of human existence: that life and death bear moral binaries, that death carried an inherent evil in its sting.

Glück is only one of a long tradition of poets working to adapt folklore and mythology into art for modern audiences. Authors dissect stories and characters into their contemporary implications, blending ancient and contemporary into what is simultaneously familiar and foreign and exploring important questions for readers in the process. While many poets work in the tradition of mythology of ancient Greece, from Glück’s *Averno* to Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red*, my work instead ventures into that of the Old Norse Pantheon. While other popular media reinterprets gods such as Thor and Loki to audiences today, in forms extending from blockbuster superhero movies in the Marvel Cinematic Universe to video games based in the warrior afterlife Valhalla, these figures and those adjacent to them remain largely underutilized in poetry.

Everything in Norse mythology drives toward the end, in a catastrophic event known as Ragnarök. Outlined in Snorri Sturluson’s *The Prose Edda* as well as in *The Poetic Edda*, the sprawling battle destroys nearly every figure from the known mythology, to the traditional heroes found in Odin and Thor to the monsters they fight through time like the Fenris Wolf and trickster god Loki. The end of gods and monsters

destroys the known structure of the world, but clear a path for renewal and hope rises from the ashes. The primary subject of my collection, Hel, does not live to see the new world rise, though the method of her destruction is notably ignored within the Eddas. The death goddess, believed by contemporary scholars to be half-corpse, receives her most detailed and noteworthy description in *The Prose Edda*. As she stands alongside her brothers, Fenris Wolf and the Midgard Serpent, Sturluson describes Hel's role and power within the mythology with words of negative connotation such as "famine," "hunger," and "sickbed" (39). Her kingdom is ensnared in these and other descriptors that portray evil and contempt from the leader banished to rule. At the end of this description comes a more direct description of the woman who rules over "the people who have died of disease or old age" with, "she is half black and half a lighter flesh colour and is easily recognized. Mostly she is gloomy and cruel" (39). This paragraph of prose forms the basis for "Autoimmune, an Erasure" within the collection. Both Eddas provide more mentions of Hel and her powers, including her brief role in Baldr's death as the gods come to her kingdom to reclaim their favorite son. She appears in the narrative to pose a conditional test for Baldr's release, which Loki thwarts in what is seen as his ultimate betrayal of Asgardian gods. His resulting punishment becomes the most urgent catalyst towards Ragnarök (*Prose Edda* 68). These two stories outline the extent of her power and agency within the mythology. Despite the lack of her presence in Ragnarök, my chapbook works to reclaim Hel's place in the narrative as a woman cast out and hated by the culture of the gods. She, alongside her more notable father and brothers, advocates the need for an end, and the hope for a rebirth they will never see.

My plan B thesis, a poetry chapbook titled *The End of the Known World*, works to bring together Norse Mythology and the experience of chronic illness and pain with Hel, goddess of death, as the main vehicle. The collection intersperses a detailed reimagining of Hel's historically sparse narrative with the realities of existing with chronic illness from a speaker in the contemporary world. Pain forms the connective tissue between both lines as two women, separated through time and myth, navigate life, youth, and femininity in negotiations of coping and loss. Sections dedicated to the goddess form the narrative backbone of the project, while the emotional core lies in more diverse reflections on conditions such as autoimmune disease, migraines, and OCD from the contemporary speaker. Together, the poems work to unravel the walls built around those who so often suffer without expression.

Literature Review

After a class in Norse Mythology and interest in female monstrosity drew me to Hel and the eventual creation of *The End of the Known World*, Louise Glück's *Averno* became my resounding introduction to the potential of mythology as a tool in contemporary poetry. Within her tenth published collection, Louise Glück forges a conversation around life and death, female oppression and autonomy, and general "lamentations" with Greek mythology's Persephone as the guiding subject and figure. As a reader, stepping into *Averno* feels like passing through the entrance to the underworld for which the collection is named. In her poems, Glück cultivates a heavy atmosphere through descriptions and assertions, translated in sections tied directly to Persephone and those dedicated to more human grappling. The poems by no means fall under a single,

dampening note; nuance comes in the changing of seasons, in the noticing of the natural world, in the continual rediscovery of those things that remind one of life, in the refusal to villainize death in poems such as “Crater Lake.” While many aspects of my thesis found roots in elements of *Averno*, of most specific interest to my work was Glück’s ability to mold Persephone and her well known story to new purposes and messages. The text often subverts the expectations attached to the woman whose only mythological role is to snatch a bite of forbidden fruit and tie herself unknowingly to the underworld forever. However, *Averno* complicates this narrative in a multitude of ways. Two poems, both titled “Persephone the Wanderer,” present two distinct possibilities for how Persephone came to know death and exist in the underworld and why her mother’s grief begat seasons. The duplicate possibilities of the narrative create an avenue for reimagining and shaping often reserved for folklore retellings. Additionally, the first version of “Persephone the Wanderer” refuses to distinguish the living and dead worlds as binary good and evil. Instead, a sexually active Persephone reflects on the fact that “she has been a prisoner since she has been a daughter” (18). In poems like this one, Glück works to unravel the narrative that Persephone was little more than a kidnapped victim, an object for her mother and husband to fight over. By crafting her mother as a figure to flee from, the figure receives more emotion, complication, and will than most narratives grant. While my work targets a goddess of death from a different mythological foundation, many of the patterns correlate. Hel is shallowly described and rarely granted importance in Norse myth, and the spaces left by the ancient texts opened a pathway for me to imagine Hel’s full character according to my own purpose while actively rejecting the implications of empty evil bestowed by her space in history.

While I consulted several more of Glück's books as I prepared for and worked on my own poetry, including *The Triumph of Achilles* and *The Seven Ages*, the book I consulted most in the structure of my chapbook was *Meadowlands*, one of the poet's earlier ventures into the adaptations of Greek mythology. In this collection, she utilizes Penelope, Odysseus, and their son Telemachus to explore concepts adjacent to love, abandonment, waiting, and the deterioration of marriage. Completely rethinking the narrative constructed in Homer's *Odyssey* for these characters, Glück moves back and forth between direct character studies and the voice of a contemporary speaker expressing discomfort in their current marriage — often in separate poems, but occasionally blending those narratives together in examples like "Quiet Evening." The collection often swings back and forth between the contemporary speaker's life and focus and pure mythological interpretations. The mythology is most often split between a third person narrator and the voices of Telemachus and Circe. It is the movement back and forth between distinct times and narratives that I chose to emulate in my own work, with two distinct strands of character and narrative that paint a complex emotional picture when paired together. In *The End of the Known World*, pain is the predominant linking factor between Hel and a contemporary speaker.

Within Byock's translation of *The Prose Edda*, Hel is literally branded as one of "Loki's Monstrous Children." One of the driving desires behind *The End of the Known World* is to sympathize a "monster" into someone feminine, powerful, and kind despite her pain and the harsh treatment given to her by Norse mythology's gods. One of the inspirations for this sympathetic telling comes in Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*, composed as "a novel in verse," that explores the intersections between a contemporary

artist's life story and the tale of the ancient Greek Monster Geryon. In the introduction to the novel, Carson outlines the sympathetic reading given to the monster, as well as the way at which his killing came with no prior signs of danger or violence, at the hands of a mythological hero previously unquestionable in terms of morality. Throughout her experimental novel, Carson integrates this sympathetic interpretation with her contemporary subject. Myth and reality blend together as contemporary Geryon endures sexual abuse, abandonment, and other traumas as part of his life story. To reshape familiar monsters into sympathetic figures is a unique challenge to tackle, especially as the nature of monsters is generally their separation from humanity or, in mythology, from idealized pantheons of gods. The *Autobiography of Red* provided a model for prompting audiences to rethink what they have learned from past experiences with figures such as Hel.

One of the challenges I faced in my thesis was to tie together a contemporary "I" strand and that of Hel, goddess of death, and Eavan Boland provided a model for molding together the mythological and real. The heartbeat of Boland's *In a Time of Violence* lies in pained history rather than mythology, but the "Legends" she alludes to in the second section of the collection forms texture for both the cultural past and emotional present. Some poems use mythological figures to discuss historical erasure, such as the Persephone-centric "The Pomegranate" and brief mentions of a dangerously ambiguous Oracle of Delphi in "In Which the Ancient History I Learn is Not My Own." Unlike many of the Greek mythology infused poems Glück composes in her work, most of which maintain specific distance between contemporary speakers and the mythological,

Boland instead chooses to inseparably intertwine the contemporary and ancient into one impactful blend. The first stanza of the poem “Love” reads,

Dark falls on this mid-western town
 where we once lived when myths collided.
 Dusk has hidden the bridge in the river
 which slides and deepens
 to become the water
 the hero crossed on his way to hell. (Boland 24)

The collision of real and mythical in this and other poems creates an explicit connection between the contemporary speaker presented in *In a Time of Violence* and the stories the collection chooses to wield. In “Love,” readers see that the speaker uses mythology as a lens in which to view past experiences and memory. The poem overlays mythology onto familiar, real-world images to portray the experience of using stories to interpret the world. While *The End of the Known World* primarily employs the separation of the mythological and contemporary, one connecting poem will serve to entangle the “I” speaker with an interest in Hel and her surrounding mythology to build a bridge between the two primary strands. The entire “Legends” section of *In a Time of Violence* informs moves I considered as I composed a poem of explicit intersection.

While my earliest exploration into literature for this project led to poetry based in mythology, later research dug into the legacy of pain and illness writing within the genre. Many poets have contended with personal experiences of pain throughout the ages as a tool to magnify a deeply raw human experience. One poem of particular interest and inspiration came in Tory Dent’s “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” named after and using

lines from the Sylvia Plath poem of the same title. Within the poem, Dent weaves together lines pulled from Plath's work with a contemporary speaker's narration on the experience of dying from an unnamed disease. Far from derivative, Dent's work instead places her own lines in direct conversation with Plath's, building sequences such as, "This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary. / The trees of the mind are black. Their irregular branches, / like broken arms backlit from MRI dye, offset by yearning" (1-3). As she wields Plath's words as building blocks for her extended images and metaphors of illness and pain, Dent cultivates a tone both haunting and intimate to translate unique bodily failure to readers. The visual nature of "The Moon and the Yew Tree" provided inspiration for the ways in which pain might be conveyed through images, as well as the power that can be drawn in direct interaction with other works in poetry. Another prominent poet to explore aspects of illness and pain is Meena Alexander, particularly in the poem titled "Diagnosis." In powerful manner, Alexander's words convey in intense brevity the frozen moment that comes in diagnosis and the spiraling implications a diagnosis can have on understanding your body and its future potential for failure. As the poem moved readers between the scene of a painful diagnosis and the resulting mental onslaught, Alexander chooses a compact but effective method of delivery, in lines such as, "Inviolable bones/Torn ligament of language." While my personal style tends toward longer lines and deeper descriptions, Alexander makes a clear argument for the power of perfectly selected words in illness-centric poetry.

Another influential text came in Neil Gaiman's *Norse Mythology*, a largely faithful retelling of the events outlined in *The Prose Edda*. Within his work, Gaiman translates the ancient tales for modern audiences through contemporary skills in

narrativity, enhanced detail, and what the book jackets describe as “deft and witty prose.” *Norse Mythology* characterizes many of the figures that appear in my chapbook, and Gaiman’s work is what first raised my questions surrounding Hel and her siblings as sympathetic figures and as part of the gods’ self-fulfilling prophecy. While the primary function of this text in relation to my project was referential, Gaiman’s ability to twist the ancient stories to ask contemporary questions is something I value as I endeavor to translate many of these stories into poetry.

Although vastly different in content from *The End of the Known World* and the other literature reviewed in this section, the impact of Tracy K. Smith’s *Life on Mars* on my sense of poetry and willingness to explore within it is undeniable. Poems such as “My God, It’s Full of Stars” push past all traditional notions I once held about poetry with elements such as illustrative use of pop culture and extensive commitment to many of the conventions of sci-fi normally ignored in poetry. Smith’s work invited me to experiment in form, content, and passion within my own poems, and provided a model for how it all comes together in a cohesive and powerful collection. *Life on Mars* is one of my most read books, and finds itself reflected in some of my own poems, especially “Projecting Pain Onto Stars.”

Methods and Composition

In the early conceptual stages of *The End of the Known World*, I planned to center focus on Fenris Wolf as a figure to embody the concept of self-fulfilling prophecy with a distant speaker that served as a hybrid between Hel, his sister, and a contemporary contender with chronic pain in the form of migraine. However, as ideas developed and

poems began to take shape, Hel absorbed my attention and building a complete narrative in her story became a greater goal. I also widened my contemporary speaker's focus to a more wholistic view of a dysfunctional body and brain, translating migraine alongside unexplained tachycardia, autoimmune disease, and OCD. Early in the drafting process, the contemporary speaker and Hel became distinct threads rather than the hybrid I originally intended. However, initial drafts often utilized a first-person speaker for both women. In revision, I decided to reach for greater distinction between threads by devoting an omniscient third person speaker for most of Hel's story. The contemporary speaker continues to operate in a first-person perspective. I often considered the distinct threads in the way one might think through individual lines of a braided nonfiction essay, and the connective element between the two lines was the pain both women experienced that, in many cases, bore stark similarities. Alternating between more narrative driven mythological retellings and more experimental translations of pain and illness provided energy in contrasts and movement in tone and style.

While several poems remained similar to their first drafts, most in the collection received overhauls in form and focus in the revision process as my vision for the collection as a whole clarified. As a writer who goes into initial drafting willing to explore on whims and vibes, the process of creating a cohesive chapbook was heavily reliant on revision at every stage to tie individual concepts together. Before I launched into the end stages of my revisions, I revisited many of the works of poetry I consulted in my preliminary literature review, which helped me with general thoughts on form as well as innovations for revising with energy in mind. I allowed myself to be vicious in

rewriting and cutting, even starting over when a poem no longer fit into the wider goals of the chapbook.

More than anything, I hope *The End of the Known World* succeeds in translating the experience of chronic illness, mental illness, and pain. Additionally, I hope pain intersects with a sympathetic retelling of a mythological monster who, in my thinking, also embodies an existence marked by pain. As a whole, I hope the reading experience is simultaneously energetic and contemplative, intimate and relatable.

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