Bourne toWrite...
creative writing workshops

The Furies Follow

by Dave Appleby

In these uncertain days, a lad does what he has to do to keep himself alive and to ensure his tribe endures beyond the harvesting of samphire from the tidal mud, beyond the gathering of whelks, until his last surviving grandson spears the final eel.

Times always change, but some things never alter. Our betters lived in lush, green, stream-fed meadows sheltered by the hills; we huddled on the windy coast. They were well-fed on eggs and juicy steaks, which made them tall and strong; we barely had enough to eat. So, they were strong and we were weak. When they demanded, we appeased. They took; we gave. They scorned us, and we played the humble part.

We paid our taxes at the solstice ceremony. They gathered at the shore. Our maidens danced; our young men sported. Then they watched us gather food, and when there was enough, we made a feast for them.

That year, I was a boy of twelve; my part in the performance was to catch the octopus. I'd learned to hold my breath and, carrying a rock for ballast, sink beneath the water, blowing bubbles, simulating signals of distress and pretending to be drowning until an octopus, mistaking me for dinner, jetted from its lair and wrapped its tentacles around me, dragging me towards its beak. Then I would jettison the rock and draw my spike. You have to stab between its eyes, into its brain. It dies at once, turns white and goes limp. Then you can break the surface, holding it aloft.

But as I clambered from the water, I attracted the attention of a baron in a lilac tunic and an ermine robe. I was, you see, distinctive. Mother had been taken as a tribute and, when she had served her purpose, sent back to the coast, adrift. So I was shaped as they were, though my features had the delicacy typical of us. This mixed blood made me singularly beautiful. I caught his eye.

He wanted me.

I was despatched to a secluded cove to serve his appetite.

He had only two hands; it seemed he had a dozen. They were everywhere. He touched me here; he touched me there. I was embraced, stroked, rubbed and held, entangled in his lanky limbs. He licked me, sucked me, kissed me with his hungry lips. His sour breath bathed me. I was …

It was horrid.

All at once, I saw myself through his eyes: prey. A delicacy to be tasted, like an olive—flesh for chewing and the stone spat out into the dirt.

And then the bad blood, cursed blood, doomed blood of my hybrid heritage rose in me, just and righteous, like the strong wine served at Mass; and I, freed by my fury from restraint, was given power by the gods of wrath. I didn't have my spike, and so I throttled him. He spasmed, and he died.

Thus, I committed the first sin of Oedipus, though not, thank Jupiter, his second.