

Hymn to Hermes: The Busiest Baby on Olympus

Based on the Homeric Hymns, adapted by Leanne Guenther

I will sing of Hermes, son of Zeus and the nymph Maia, the clever messenger of the gods who brings good luck.

He was born at dawn in a shadowy cave on Mount Cyllene. By noon he was playing music, and by evening he had stolen his big brother Apollo's cattle. That was his very first day.

He didn't stay in his cradle long. At the door of the cave he found a tortoise munching grass, and he laughed out loud. "What luck!" he said. He scooped out the shell, stretched a cowhide over it, added seven strings, and made the very first lyre. When he strummed it, it rang out sweetly, and he sang to it about his own mother and father.

As the sun went down, he ran off to the mountain meadows where Apollo's cattle grazed and cut fifty cows from the herd. To trick anyone who followed, he drove them backward, so their hoof prints pointed the wrong way, and he tied twigs and leaves to his own feet so no one could tell his tracks either. He hid the cows in a cave, then slipped home through the keyhole like a puff of autumn mist and climbed back into his cradle, as innocent as can be.

In the morning Apollo came storming in. Baby Hermes curled up in his blankets like a glowing coal hidden in ashes. "Me? Steal cows?" he said. "I was born yesterday! My feet are soft and the ground is rough. I don't even know what a cow is!"

So they went to Zeus to settle it, and when Hermes told his story with a perfectly straight face, Zeus laughed out loud. He told the brothers to make peace. Then Hermes picked up his lyre and played, and the music was so lovely that Apollo's heart melted. "That's worth fifty cows!" he said. So Hermes gave Apollo the lyre, and Apollo gave Hermes the cattle and a shining golden staff. From that day on, the two brothers were the best of friends.

Farewell, Hermes, son of Zeus and Maia! And now I will remember you as I begin another song.









