



# Orpheus and Eurydice

A Poem by William Page



Copyright © William Page 2011-20220

# Orpheus and Eurydice

## 1

When they told him, “Eurydice is dead,”  
their words fell to the bottom of his heart.  
It wasn’t that he refused to understand them.  
It was that her name combined with the idea  
of death was incomprehensible.  
The six syllables *Eurydice is dead*,  
echoed in a place inside his mind  
that he had never before inhabited,  
a place buried so far beneath the diverse selves  
of his poetic nature that he was lost.

Again they told him: “Eurydice is dead.”  
Still, he refused to acknowledge their presence.  
His eyes glared at them, astonished,  
as if their message were impossible,  
as if the death of a woman, a mortal,  
violated the laws of his universe.  
He stood, transfixed, severed from himself,  
as if his grief had disengaged his sense,  
as if he feared that habits as familiar  
as motion and speech might become acceptance,  
as if his world, fastened to Eurydice,  
had been ripped out in empathy at the thought  
of her passing into the realm of the dead.

And when they that had told him finally left,  
he did not know that they had gone away.  
All outward sense had gone from him.  
His mind rejected ten-thousand futures  
of a life without her soul at its center  
until all his wild, hopeful thoughts dissolved  
into a silent, uncompromising present,  
until his mind in violent overturning  
exhausted itself and became quiet.

At first he didn’t recognize sight without thought.  
He had never measured before how much words,

as illuminating as his language was,  
overshadowed his fine perceptiveness.  
His eyes, unaccustomed to being eclipsed  
by the receptive body of his soul,  
took in everything without closeness, diffused,  
as if he could be everywhere at once.  
Animals approached his open gaze and stared  
into it as if it were a wide landscape,  
and the trees near him, that had once bowed down  
to his impossible charm, now seemed to retreat  
further into the dark mist of the forest,  
and the wind, that had once before his voice stopped,  
now blew through him unraveling the seams  
that held his spirit inside his body.

Finally he was pulled to the earth and slept.

2

He slept, or a part of him slept, a second part  
was awakened by a shimmering light,  
a light of powerful present substance,  
a light that should have been recognizable,  
except that he, unacquainted with gods,  
saw instead his own fear and confusion.  
He did not know that this was the messenger,  
the one he had summoned with his desire,  
the one that would take him to Eurydice.  
For Orpheus this new world without sense,  
without a preference for past or future,  
without the height and depth of physicality,  
confused him because it lacked the signposts  
of a single, encompassing perspective.  
Objects were there without reaching or grasping  
or any possibility of holding;  
all around him they rose up and fell away,  
made up, as they were, not of the elements,  
but of the shifting sands of light and spirit.

Somehow he uttered, "Who," without a mouth;  
without lips or a tongue it was hurled up

out of some secret depth of questioning.  
Again he uttered, "Who," and watched how his voice  
expanded and filled the surrounding space  
before it fell away. This he could be;  
this was an identity he understood:  
voice—pure, uninhibited, resonant voice.  
(What could have been better for a poet?)  
He was amazed, but was still more amazed  
when that unknown present light engulfed him  
and from within him answered: "Hermes."  
That communication could be intimate  
and without boundary or symbol pleased him,  
that he could enter the other without  
any angular, outside positioning  
astounded his sympathetic nature.  
(What could have been better for a lover?)  
And there was more amazement to come:  
for his gaze was, by the god, directed  
downward and fell on what he had abandoned.  
It lay unoccupied, without dimension,  
like a crumpled wrapper that had been cast off,  
like a heap of clothes that, without a body,  
had collapsed into its own uselessness.

He now realized he was among the dead;  
his fear opened before him as an abyss;  
it consumed him in a feeling of falling,  
terrified him with long whirlpool sinking.  
Without the perspective of a body  
standing firmly on a planet he slipped  
from creation's grasp into the void  
that emerged trailing behind the engulfing  
futility of his apprehension.  
The messenger god could not touch him,  
for he had fallen beneath the deepest floor  
the god's more permanent tenancy could reach.  
Hermes waited, waited until Orpheus  
completed the orbit of his indulgence;  
and when Orpheus returned out of himself,  
the god delivered his commissioned trust:  
"I am to take you to Eurydice."

Not without some joy and expectation,  
yet more wary of the shifting foundations  
of his spirit, Orpheus followed the god.

3

That such a passage could be simply wishing,  
that Orpheus, passing by ten-thousand  
memories of Eurydice, could,  
startled and unprepared, find himself  
at the far end of his crossing with her—  
this amazed him; this, he thought, was invocation;  
this was a conjuring trick that surpassed  
the wildest reaches of his inspiration.

He was again with her, had again attained her;  
yet even that first joy was absorbed  
into a distance that was her, but not her.  
The Eurydice he now encountered  
had grown in consciousness, but not in focus.  
Death had taken Eurydice alone,  
and she, unaccustomed to love without him,  
had been unable to maintain her devotion.  
Her desire had simply been washed away  
like an unanchored boat, and now she drifted  
among the dead untethered to her life's purpose,  
which had been the cultivation of his love.  
Her love had been given yet never possessed;  
it had never been completely lodged  
in the foundations of her better self.  
She had always wrapped her existence  
around the will of his greater magnetism,  
and now hoped, through him, to regain her force.  
She engulfed his impassioned resolution  
inside her deep, diffused receiving as if  
it were a coin swallowed by a dark pocket.  
She, like a black wind turned inside out,  
tried to pull his existence into her dark night.

But Orpheus resisted her; he retreated  
and withstood their imminent enfolding.

They were not alone, something immense  
had stretched a void of existing around them.  
It was as if from behind them another sky  
had poured itself out from the recesses  
of a consciousness and crouched, waiting,  
in the pit and hollow of eternity.

It was the goddess of the dead, Persephone.

4

Orpheus had entered death circumventing death.  
Drawn away from the joys of living  
on the extremity of his grief,  
he had passed into death without dying,  
so that his arrival in that dark realm  
had echoed like a song resounding  
in a great underground cave shrouded  
in centuries of silent, solemn mourning.  
He erupted on the world of the dead  
as the sun bursts forth on the frigidity  
of a December landscape at dawn,  
and his presence trailed such a disturbance  
that Persephone herself had recoiled  
in the wake of its palpitation.  
She emerged with tense, instinctive expectation  
surrounding his intrusion that had invaded  
the space that was her own flesh wounded.

What else could Orpheus have done? He charmed her.  
He gathered together all his exuberance  
and flooded the vaults of Hades with music.  
He sang of the gods praising their endurance;  
he sang of the joys of the living,  
of the green planet's unfathomed beauty;  
he sang of the greatness of existing,  
and of the lament of great loneliness;  
he sang of the one he loved, of his grief,  
and of his journey into death to regain her.  
He sang and the whole soul-inhabited  
landscape of Hades contracted to be nearer

the light of his fine, precise invoking,  
to be nearer a music that in its vibration  
could, for a time, relieve the torments of the damned.  
He sang; and the goddess, she was enchanted.  
She took pity on the separated lovers,  
and allowed them a present with no turning back;  
she allowed Orpheus to remain  
with Eurydice in Hades until a time  
when he would long to be remade in flesh,  
until he would again desire mortality.

Allowing this, and then trailing a whole  
inhabited domain of souls behind her  
magnetic attractiveness, she receded.

5

No turning back. Orpheus did not consider  
the condition the goddess had imposed.  
His joy overflowed in his victory,  
his conquered wooing, his good luck, his success.  
He had before so often assembled himself  
around Eurydice that he now flung  
himself toward her, expecting foundation.  
While she had lived, their love had embodied  
the very nature and fashion of intimacy;  
They had defined unbounded devotion,  
and now, once more, he took her without withholding,  
falling uncollected among the dark folds  
of her freshly-cut disengagement.  
He entered her again and again yet could not  
embed his existence in her boundlessness.  
She was fading; in her too open absorption  
she tried to consume him, hoping to contain him.  
She received him as the night receives the dusk,  
diffusing his essence along the open-ended  
channels of her vapor-like feeling.  
He sought desperately to rebuild her  
from the shifting sands of her unfolding death,  
but it was too late; she was already expanded  
out beyond the boundaries of his gathering.  
She was already clouds blown by the wind.  
She had lost the edge of her being



and now mingled unfocused in the landscape.  
And Orpheus, forgetting the partition  
the goddess had set around them, recoiled;  
he longed to see her clothed in the flesh that had caged  
her lost mortality; he longed to turn back.

6

He awoke, as into a dream of sleeping,  
lying under the tree where he had fallen.  
He looked out and saw his lyre in the grass;  
he heard a stream, heard water splashing over rocks;  
he even felt cold when a wind rose up  
and blew dry leaves turning over his arms and chest.  
His spirit radiated out from his body,  
as if his heart were a blinding sun  
locked in the human cage that was his chest,  
but when the evening came, without thinking,  
he lifted his hands up and rubbed his eyes,  
and so startled himself that he leapt up screaming.  
Then, both days and nights, he wandered wildly.  
Inconsolable and without belief  
in the final reality of the living,  
he sang and chanted strange, esoteric songs  
of visions and futures so disconnected,  
so inconceivable and removed from sense  
that all who heard him believed that his grief  
had led him down the path of madness.  
Finally the nymphs, unable to sleep  
because of his haunting, disturbing voice,  
ripped his flesh apart and scattered it back  
to the earth where once again it might rest,  
but the head, defying death, went on singing.  
Now he was not the poet; he was all poets.  
And what he had become ascended  
to the constellation that, formed from his lyre,  
provided orbit and habitation  
for a larger broadcasting, a more star-like,  
uninhibited, lyrical singing.



Cover Photo: Hermes, Orpheus, and Eurydice. A relief, a Roman copy of a Greek original. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, Italy



