

## The Double Death of Orpheus

Somewhere she's reeling apples,  
Reeling apples and pinning them up again,  
Pinning them up again in their trees.

They had nothing to do with Hell  
And everything to do with Hell.  
He thought he'd find her in Hell

When she was actually interning in Heaven.  
She worked in all the departments there:  
Cloudkeeping, Front Desk, Reservations.

The attempt on Heaven and its loss  
Of innocence made Heaven seem  
Less seedy. She loved sometimes

To pick an apple straight from the tree on her  
Break. This was encouraged there:  
The good being encouraged to listen to their impulses,

Carpe diem, etc. She'd move the blade across  
The round red surface of the fruit  
Like a sail navigating through a hell-spawned

Sea as the sun dropped down to drink it.  
She turned both the apple she turned  
And the turning slaver in his heart.

He grew consumed with little things like this  
The second time he lost her. The first time  
Even gravity gave in as he descended the earth

To find her. But then not even the power  
Of his strum shaking the ground  
Could stir him.

*To bring her back, don't look back.*  
It was more counsel than condition: *To bring her back, don't*  
*Look back.* Hell loves to be taken literally.

But could you blame him?  
Were there even double meanings back then  
When everything was meaning something

For the first time? Maybe his art  
Just fooled his heart;  
Or maybe his screwed-up heart

Just screwed up;  
Either way,  
He was done;

His heart split and spun  
Like that ridiculous compass  
In Donne,

And he'd never do her again.

—Rowan Ricardo Phillips

## Orfeo

*“J’ai perdu mon Eurydice . . .”*

I have lost my Eurydice,  
I have lost my lover,  
and suddenly I am speaking French  
and it seems to me I have never been in better voice;  
it seems these songs  
are songs of a high order.

And it seems one is somehow expected to apologize  
for being an artist,  
as though it were not entirely human to notice these fine points.  
And who knows, perhaps the gods never spoke to me in Dis,  
never singled me out,  
perhaps it was all illusion.

O Eurydice, you who married me for my singing,  
why do you turn on me, wanting human comfort?  
Who knows what you’ll tell the Furies  
when you see them again.

Tell them I have lost my beloved;  
I am completely alone now.  
Tell them there is no music like this  
without real grief.

In Dis, I sang to them; they will remember me.

—Louise Glück

### **Euridice Saved**

I am filled with all things seen  
for the last time. He lays with me gently  
in the unfamiliar house and kisses me. When he holds  
my head in his hands and arms, I dream of the real world.  
I look from the mirror to the light on the floor.  
I am happy with him eating bread and coffee.  
This morning when I took off my shirt to bathe,  
I noticed I held it in the air before me  
for some time. I looked at it without perception.  
When I let it fall, it did not make a noise.  
Art, I was thinking, is the imitation of what  
we called nothing when we lived on the earth.

—Linda Gregg

### **Cocktails with Orpheus**

After dark, the bar full of women part of me loves—the part that stood  
naked outside the window of Miss Geneva, recent divorcée who owned  
a gun, O Miss Geneva where are you now—Orpheus says she did

not perish, she was not turned to ash in the brutal light, she found  
a good job, she made good money, she had her own insurance and  
a house, she was a decent wife. I know descent lives in the word

decent. The bar noise makes a kind of silence. When Orpheus hands  
me his sunglasses, I see how fire changes everything. In the mind  
I am behind a woman whose skirt is hiked above her hips, as bound

as touch permits, saying don't forget me when I become the liquid  
out of which names are born, salt-milk, milk-sweet and animal-made.

I want to be a human above the body, uprooted and right, a fold  
of pleas released, but I am a black wound, what's left of the deed.

—Terrance Hayes

## THE NOCTURNE OF ORPHEUS

*(for 'the maiden in her dark, pale meadow')*

THIS COVENANT OF LOVE IN A DIRGE FOR A GOD  
HAS DELIGHTED AN ANGEL WHO OBEYS MY PLEA,  
EACH SONNET, A RHYTHM FOR HER TO DECIPHER,  
MAKING LEGIBLE A KEY IN HER DREAM OF DUSK:  
A REDNESS THAT DARKENS THE HUE OF A TULIP  
IS RICHENING HER VIEW ON THE HILL OF A LEA,  
DAPPLING HER VISTA AT THE END OF MY VIGIL,  
EVEN IF HAVOC CALLS FORTH RUIN TO KILL ME.  
NO CHURCH, NO CHAPEL, IS A REFUGE IN A STORM,  
IF WE BEG TO BE WARM, YET LET DIE THE CANDLE.  
NO HERDER, NO HERMIT, ENCHANTED BY THE SEA,  
HAS HITHERTO KNOWN THE ENNUI OF A COWARD,  
EVEN WHEN INFERNOS IN HELL BURN THE HERO:  
RADIANT AS FLINT, BE THE ACHE OF MY SORROW.

—Christian Bök

*Described by the author as: "a love-poem, written as an alexandrine sonnet in blank verse, with 33 letters to a line, all of which create a double acrostic of the dedication, while constituting a perfect anagram of the poem "When I Have Fear That I May Cease to Be" by John Keats"*

## Syringa

Orpheus liked the glad personal quality  
Of the things beneath the sky. Of course, Eurydice was a part  
Of this. Then one day, everything changed. He rends  
Rocks into fissures with lament. Gullies, hummocks  
Can't withstand it. The sky shudders from one horizon  
To the other, almost ready to give up wholeness.  
Then Apollo quietly told him: "Leave it all on earth.  
Your lute, what point? Why pick at a dull pavan few care to  
Follow, except a few birds of dusty feather,  
Not vivid performances of the past." But why not?  
All other things must change too.  
The seasons are no longer what they once were,  
But it is the nature of things to be seen only once,  
As they happen along, bumping into other things, getting along  
Somehow. That's where Orpheus made his mistake.  
Of course Eurydice vanished into the shade;  
She would have even if he hadn't turned around.  
No use standing there like a gray stone toga as the whole wheel  
Of recorded history flashes past, struck dumb, unable to utter an intelligent  
Comment on the most thought-provoking element in its train.  
Only love stays on the brain, and something these people,  
These other ones, call life. Singing accurately  
So that the notes mount straight up out of the well of  
Dim noon and rival the tiny, sparkling yellow flowers  
Growing around the brink of the quarry, encapsulizes  
The different weights of the things.

But it isn't enough

To just go on singing. Orpheus realized this  
And didn't mind so much about his reward being in heaven  
After the Bacchantes had torn him apart, driven  
Half out of their minds by his music, what it was doing to them.  
Some say it was for his treatment of Eurydice.  
But probably the music had more to do with it, and  
The way music passes, emblematic  
Of life and how you cannot isolate a note of it  
And say it is good or bad. You must  
Wait till it's over. "The end crowns all,"  
Meaning also that the "tableau"  
Is wrong. For although memories, of a season, for example,  
Melt into a single snapshot, one cannot guard, treasure  
That stalled moment. It too is flowing, fleeting;  
It is a picture of flowing, scenery, though living, mortal,  
Over which an abstract action is laid out in blunt,  
Harsh strokes. And to ask more than this  
Is to become the tossing reeds of that slow,  
Powerful stream, the trailing grasses

Playfully tugged at, but to participate in the action  
No more than this. Then in the lowering gentian sky  
Electric twitches are faintly apparent first, then burst forth  
Into a shower of fixed, cream-colored flares. The horses  
Have each seen a share of the truth, though each thinks,  
“I’m a maverick. Nothing of this is happening to me,  
Though I can understand the language of birds, and  
The itinerary of the lights caught in the storm is fully apparent to me.  
Their jousting ends in music much  
As trees move more easily in the wind after a summer storm  
And is happening in lacy shadows of shore-trees, now, day after day.”

But how late to be regretting all this, even  
Bearing in mind that regrets are always late, too late!  
To which Orpheus, a bluish cloud with white contours,  
Replies that these are of course not regrets at all,  
Merely a careful, scholarly setting down of  
Unquestioned facts, a record of pebbles along the way.  
And no matter how all this disappeared,  
Or got where it was going, it is no longer  
Material for a poem. Its subject  
Matters too much, and not enough, standing there helplessly  
While the poem streaked by, its tail afire, a bad  
Comet screaming hate and disaster, but so turned inward  
That the meaning, good or other, can never  
Become known. The singer thinks  
Constructively, builds up his chant in progressive stages  
Like a skyscraper, but at the last minute turns away.  
The song is engulfed in an instant in blackness  
Which must in turn flood the whole continent  
With blackness, for it cannot see. The singer  
Must then pass out of sight, not even relieved  
Of the evil burthen of the words. Stellification  
Is for the few, and comes about much later  
When all record of these people and their lives  
Has disappeared into libraries, onto microfilm.  
A few are still interested in them. “But what about  
So-and-so?” is still asked on occasion. But they lie  
Frozen and out of touch until an arbitrary chorus  
Speaks of a totally different incident with a similar name  
In whose tale are hidden syllables  
Of what happened so long before that  
In some small town, one indifferent summer.

—John Ashbery