



Orpheus | Mockingbirds

A tragedy in the Underworld

It was to be a sweet day. The **elder**¹ flowers were humming softly under the gently beating wings of summer bees, those simple white puffs of morning clouds had been swept clear of the sky, and Helios smiled down on the joyful Thracian party. The village had gathered and danced to herald the marriage of the **dryad**² Eurydice³, child of Apollo, and Orpheus, the fair son of **Oeagrus**⁴ and **Calliope**⁵.

It had been three years since Eurydice had first heard Orpheus's music as he wandered in the shadowed depths of the mountain forests up at the high peaks of Mount Rhodope. His effortless tune had attracted a string of entranced songbirds and dryads. With his music, Orpheus - the poet who rivaled Apollo in skill and grace - could still the wind, shake the pine boughs, bend an old oak's branches, and when he paired his voice to his lyre could even quiet the mockingbirds. She knew then that she longed for nothing more than to spend her better years dancing freely to his music.

On his wedding day, Orpheus played first the songs of that distant mountain forest, the story of how they first met. He then gathered a bundle of fibers and from these wove the story of their love into a rope braided by his music. The poet's stories filled the long morning and stretched out into

¹ *Sambucus nigra*. The generic name is likely derived from the Greek σαμβύκη (sambuke), a type of harp.

² To the Ancient Greeks, dryads, or hamadryads, were spirits that lived in trees. Initially the word applied only to oaks but eventually became synonymous with all trees. There are a number of different common and scientific names derived from the term: king cobras were formerly *Hamadryas hannah*, the fungus, *Ceriporus squamosus*, is sometimes called dryad's saddle, Australian treefrogs are in the family Pelodryadidae, and there are a few insects and other amphibians with the root.

³ Pronounced: "You-RID-ih-see"

⁴ There is a tawny-skipper, *Parphorus oeagrus*, but it's not clear if it is named after Oeagrus.

⁵ The calliope hummingbird, *Selasphorus calliope*, is named after the muse. Virgil invoked her in the Aeneid: "Calliope, begin! Ye sacred Nine, Inspire your poet in his high design, To sing what slaughter manly Turnus made, What souls he sent below the Stygian shade, What fame the soldiers with their captain share, And the vast circuit of the fatal war; For you in singing martial facts excel; You best remember, and alone can tell."

the late afternoon. As the sun drifted off to the horizon, a large crowd had gathered and was fawning over the lovers, for they reminded the old of the flame that haunted their young love and to the young they foretold of life's sweetness ahead. The **nymphs**⁶ too were drawn into the light of the wedding. Following on their heels was **Hymenaeus**⁷, that god of weddings, having arrived on the salty shores of the Ciconian coast late in the afternoon to lend his providence to the young couple.

But something scratched at his beard, and as he made his way up the white sandy beach to the altar, his expression, like his saffron robes, hung low, dragging and catching against the cockleburs.

The god of weddings reached Eurydice and Orpheus, and opened his mouth to speak his blessing, but like his robes, this too was caught, and there it stayed, stuck in his throat. With a portentous turn, he set his back to them and moved to light the torches, hoping they would bring a warmth and radiance to the ceremony where his words could not. And just as Helios's chariot returned to the stables for the night, Hymenaeus lit the ring of torches. These bright flames, he reasoned, might reassure Orpheus and Eurydice that the gods still favored the union. But the flames flickered and struggled, faltering under a thick black smoke that rose into the crowd. "Naught without labor," offered Hymenaeus before walking back to the salted shores.

And yet those gathered together still smiled through the ill-omen of smoke that made their eyes and noses scratch. The rest of the ceremony came and went. The two once separate paths were woven into a single strand. And each who had come to see them married went home wondering what fate was to meet them in the morning.

It rained through the night, a steady thrumming patterned against the lovers' tent. Eurydice found herself in a strange dream in which the jealous **Aristaeus**⁸ had tirelessly pursued her through the dew-covered tall grass. He chased her to the edge of a steep cliff that blocked her escape. Peering over the ledge and down into the tumultuous waves below, she saw giant serpents foaming in the waters. But before the Fates could cut her rope, Eurydice was startled awake by the first rays of light piercing the tent.

As the sky shed its darkness, Eurydice put on a white shift and left the tent, wending her way through the meadow down towards the beach to greet the sun. The warm morning air was lifting the night's rain into a thick fog, and held Eurydice in a loving embrace of white. She hummed Orpheus's songs, but where his voice had rang so pure and joyous on the day before, she lent the music a somber weight.

⁶ Nymph is also the name for the larval stage of insects with incomplete metamorphosis

⁷ The god of marriage. There is a genus of trees in the pea family, *Hymenaea*. The trees have compound leaves with two paired leaflets. In folk etymology, there's often a link drawn between the god and hymen, the "virginal membrane." A genus of wasps, *Apanteles*, has several Greek figures for the specific epithet: *A. hymeniae*, *A. aristaeus*, and *A. meriones*. When you're naming several hundred wasps in the same genus you need to get creative with species names!

⁸ A minor Greek god who Hesiod called "the pastoral Apollo." In Virgil's account of this story, Eurydice was bitten by a snake while Aristaeus was chasing her. While the connection is not quite clear, there is a genus of deep-sea shrimp that bear his name: *Aristius*, as well as a riffle beetle, *Macrelmis aristaeus*.

Hearing her mournful song, nymphs shivered free of the yarrow, hyacinths, and anemones⁹ that lined the path. Floating wordlessly down to her side, they shared in her sorrow. But Eurydice resolved to leave her sorrow behind. She set her expression firmly up at the horizon, determined to leave the ill omens of Hymenaeus behind. As she walked, she absentmindedly felt a rock with her foot and gingerly stepped over it. With her gaze pointed to the heavens, she failed to see the earthly **horned viper**¹⁰ curled up against the rock's warmth. Her foot came down on the asp, and the snake struck swiftly, injecting its poison into her veins. She fell to the ground, and the nymphs fell silent, watching helplessly as **Hades** stole her away to the underworld.

Orpheus woke instantly and knew what had happened. He ran to the field and into the ring of nymphs who mourned over her lifeless body. A chill ran down his back and a cry of anguish pulled at his chest. The first day of their marriage was the last of her life, and it ended with an oily dark smoke rising from the funeral pyre as they sent Eurydice's body in search of her soul.

Orpheus was paralyzed by the loss for 12 long days. Each day seemed an insurmountable task filled only with an endless void that lacked in sense or purpose. How could there be meaning in a world that would steal away his wife at so young an age? He mourned through his lyre, his fingers racing across the strings, frantically calling through the dark to his lost love, sending a prayer to each of the 12 gods.

Orpheus had been struck by **Cupid's** arrow, and he could still feel it lodged in his heart. He could not let Eurydice go, nor ever hope to love another again. And he could not forgive the gods this torment. The gods of Olympus heard these prayers, and Apollo listened and his heart wept at the beauty in the Thracian's music. But the gods knew that no mortals, save **Heracles** and **Odysseus**, had ever gone into the underworld and returned.

On the 12th day, when the white ash that was all that remained of her body had been stolen away by the winds, Orpheus stood and made his way through **Taenarus** down to the **Styx**. And there he looked fearlessly into the six eyes of three-headed of **Cerberus**¹¹. He sang to the dog of a fierce love and the dog bowed in obeisance. His song carried across the murky waters of the Styx, and **Charon**¹², that eternal ferryman of the dead, paddled to the shore to hear the poet, and wept at his story. The whole of the underworld stood still while the Thracian cast his spell on those hollow caverns. **Ixion's** eternally spinning wheel came to a halt, **Sisyphus** held his rock in place, **Tantalus** was free of thirst, and the eagles and buzzards spared both **Prometheus** and **Tityus** their livers. It was said that for the first and last time, the cheeks of the Furies were wet with tears.

Hades and **Persephone**, from their obsidian thrones, listened to the poet's heartache. Tears flowed from Persephone, for Orpheus's loss reminded her of how her own life had also been stolen away at too young an age by that lecherous old Hades. Even Hades shed a tear for the youth and his aching heart. Was Orpheus's love not the same love that had driven Hades to steal Persephone.

⁹ Yarrow is *Achillea millefolium* after Achilles, the great warrior of the Trojan War. Hyacinth and Anemone

¹⁰ Horned vipers scientific name is *Cerastes cerastes*. Cerastes means horned. In Greek mythology, cerastes is a horned serpent-like creature. Virgil associates it with Medusa.

¹¹ Child of Typhon and Echidna. **Echidna**, half-woman & half-snake, has lent her name to many beasts, including snakes, morays, and the primitive mammalian echidnas.

¹² Charon gave his name to a moon of the planet Pluto, Pluto being the Roman's name for Hades

So moved were the King and Queen of the underworld that they could not turn away from his prayers. They bade the Fates to mend the cord of Eurydice's life. When it was so, they turned and called out to Eurydice, who was stumbling through the dark without direction. They told young Orpheus to lead his wife back up to the world of the living on the condition that he was not to look back at her until he had left the vale of **Avernus**¹³ behind him. If he did, she would return to the underworld forever.

Eurydice followed slowly behind Orpheus, straining from the wound on her ankle, which was still purple and swollen. Each step was a struggle. From this gift of a second chance, Orpheus felt light of foot and made his way quickly away from that rancorous vale of Avernus. He strained his ears to track the padding of his love trailing behind him. It was a torment each time he lost the sound of her feet following him up into the light. He longed to hold her in his arms, to turn and see her sweet smile, though he knew the cost.

As the light drew closer, a panic grew in him. Once more, he could not hear her, could not sense her. He feared she had lost her way in those dark winding intestines snaking through the earth's underbelly. He feared that he might lose her again. And it ripped at his heart. The looming sense of loss ate away at his balance and he stumbled upward. His breath grew short. He could see Avernus's edge just ahead and he knew he would lose Eurydice if he looked back, but she'd be just as gone if she were to lose sight of him.

The underworld swallowed light in its shadow. But here, near to the surface, under the sun's light, Orpheus's own shadow appeared. He felt sure that he was free of those horrible glaring eyes of the Fates. How would they know if he stole just a single glance to make sure she was still following?

And there was Eurydice, in her perfect form, a long flowing white slip billowed elegantly behind her, dancing in the breeze with her gentle auburn hair. Orpheus caught and held her smile in that fleeting moment before it turned to horror. Just as their eyes met, her ghost of a body was ripped backwards, pulled apart into a mist at the callous grip of the Fates as they stole her once more from Orpheus. The mist called out a final farewell, its faint traces barely audible to Orpheus.

Oh, how he mourned, his plaintive wails echoing a hollow chorus over the waters of the Styx and deep into the halls of **Erebus**. Orpheus lasted seven days on those shores, sated only by his own torment and tears. He prayed to the gods to let him back into that world of the dead. But the ghosts, Charon, Cerberus, and Hades who listened once more to his song, now felt nothing but a cold pity for the youth. Persephone's heart was moved, but even she knew that a second chance comes but once.

On that seventh day, Orpheus felt the full weight of that loss again wash over him. He left the underworld and wandered the Thracian mountains from the coarse ridges of Mount Rhodope to the windy spires of **Haemus**. His mourning a chastisement of the cruel gods as much as a plea for death that might reunite him with Eurydice.

Dionysus's **Maenads** heard his songs and went lustfully after him. They poked, they prodded, they teased Orpheus, hoping to bring him back to life. But Orpheus had spurned all gods other than

¹³ There is an Avernus cave beetle, *Pseudanophthalmus avernus*, which is found in the eastern US

that somber god of light and music, Phoebus¹⁴ Apollo. He had forsaken the joys of the flesh, the delight of the vine, the ecstatic revelry of dance, and only mourned for his lost love. The Maenads went mad with jealousy, and in a frenzy they stoned poor Orpheus to death, at last releasing him from the mortal world down to his love below.

Notes: Taxonomy is subject to change based on new discovery, genetic analyses, etc. While a species may be moved from one genus to another (or one family to another), the specific epithet remains constant. Such is the case for the mockingbirds, which were originally in the genus *Orpheus*, before being moved to *Mimus*. There is a subspecies, *Mimus polyglottus orpheus*, found in the Bahamas. The warbling vireo, *Vireo gilvus*, is *orpheusvireo* in Dutch.

The maracas snouted tree frog, which is endemic to Brazil, was named in honor of Eurydice (*Scinax eurydice*). The 19th century naturalist, Constantine Samuel Rafinesque, placed brook salamanders in the genus *Eurycea* (here in the northeast, we have the northern two-lined salamander, *E. bislineata*). He was known for coining new terms when it came to binomials, particularly ones that were difficult to trace back to their origins, and this genus was possibly derived from Eurydice's name.

There are many versions of the story. I have blended several, opting for the ending in Aeschylus's lost play, the *Bassarids*.

¹⁴ Older iterations of Apollo have him, and not Helios, as the god of the sun. Though Helios is occasionally referred to as Phoebus.