

Orpheus and Eurydice

There has only been one mortal whose skill at playing the lyre compared with the skill of the god of music, golden Apollo, and that mortal's name was Orpheus. When he played, the birds would swoop down from the heavens and sit on the branches above his head. When he played, the animals of the fields would gather round him, their heads cocked to one side.

Now Orpheus had fallen in love with a woman called Eurydice. There was a wedding, a magnificent wedding, but all through the wedding ceremony the candles and the lamps in the temple gave off an oily black smoke so that the guests coughed and choked. Even the priests had to wipe tears from their eyes. They looked at one another and shook their heads: 'This is a bad omen. Such things should never happen at a wedding.' And the priests were right to be worried.

The very next morning Eurydice woke up early. She climbed out of the bed where Orpheus was still deep in sleep. She pulled on her clothes and went out walking. The dawn was breaking. A snake that was coiled up on a rock woke up. It slid through the grass just as Eurydice was walking barefoot across the meadow. Their paths crossed. It sunk its fangs into her ankle; its poison coursed through her veins. With a cry she fell to the ground. When Orpheus found her she was lying dead and cold. He lifted her in his arms. He carried her home, his face wet with tears.

When the funeral was finished, when the pyre had burned and the heat of the fire's heart had consumed the house of bone, Orpheus picked up his lyre and set off on a great journey. He travelled over land and sea until he came to a dark cave. He made his way through tunnels that wound to the left and right. He delved into darkness. At last he came to the edge of an oily, black river, the river of forgetfulness. On the far side of it he could see the shadowy hills of the country he was seeking. He was looking across towards the land of the dead.

Orpheus stared over the water, with only the thought of Eurydice in his mind. How could his lovely bride be there, in that strange dark place? Suddenly there came the sound of growling, then a harsh barking. Out of the shadows the great three-headed dog Cerberus, who guards the river bank, leapt at Orpheus, his lips curled back from his teeth. Orpheus lifted his lyre to his shoulder and began to play; and such was the beauty of his music that the monstrous dog stopped in his tracks, wagged his tail, closed his six red eyes, rolled onto his back and howled with his three heads. The beauty of the music floated out across the water and reached the ears of Charon, the ferryman. He poled his boat towards the sound. Orpheus never stopped playing his lyre. He stepped from the bank into the boat and the ancient ferryman pushed away from the land and poled his boat across the river. When they reached the far side, Orpheus, still playing, jumped from the boat and walked into the shadows.

Soon there was a whispering around him, a rustling, a shuffling, like the sound of the wind blowing through dead leaves: the dead were gathering. They were following him. They were enchanted by his music. It made them weep for sorrows they could not remember any more; it made them laugh for joys that were forgotten, for the dead have lost all memory of their lives. They're a drifting host of whispering ghosts.

On and on Orpheus walked, surrounded by the dead, and then he saw a palace loom out of the shadows. As he approached it, the dead fell back. He found that he was walking alone. He was approaching the dwelling place of their king. He made his way between black gates; he climbed steps of black stone; a doorway of black ebony swung open before him. He entered the hall. At the far end of it there were two thrones. On one sat the king of terrors, Hades himself, his eyes as deep as open graves, his black beard spread across his belly. Beside Hades sat his wife, beautiful Persephone. She was like a moon shining in a dark sky, like a mistletoe berry in the depths of winter. Orpheus, still playing his lyre, walked up to the two thrones. He stood before the god and goddess. He looked into their faces and then he began to sing.

'We mortals are wretched things and the gods who know no care have woven sorrow into the pattern of our lives. Even the sparrow on the branch, even the wren in the willow knows more of sorrow than the

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thundering gods, who have never felt the cold hand of death closing around their hearts. But you, you mighty gods, you have known the sweet pains of love. You have felt Aphrodite's shining shafts. Great Hades, imagine those summer months, when Persephone is gone, lasting forever. Imagine, if you can, her pale face crumbling into dust. That is how it is for mortal man. Great Hades, I beg you, give me back my Eurydice.'

There was a silence. Then Persephone turned to Hades, her face streaming with silver tears, and Hades turned to his wife. One oily black tear trickled down his cheek and splashed onto his beard. He drew breath and spoke: 'Fetch me the three Fates.'

The three ancient sisters were brought before him, the first who spins out the thread of a life, the second who measures its length and the third who cuts it. Hades looked into the wrinkled, leathery face of the third sister. 'Find the cut thread of Eurydice's life and mend it.'

The third sister bowed before the god.

Hades turned to Orpheus. 'Now go! Leave my palace! Leave my realm, and she will follow you. But do not look behind you. Do not look over your shoulder until the light of the sun shines full on your face.'

Orpheus bowed. He turned on his heel and left the palace. He made his way across the shadowy kingdom until he came to the river's edge. Charon, the ferryman, was waiting for him; he climbed into the boat. As he sat down he felt it tremble, as if someone had climbed in behind him. He kept his eyes fixed on the far shore. When they reached the riverbank, he stepped out of the boat and behind him he could hear footsteps, soft footsteps following him. As he journeyed, he could sometimes hear the snap of a twig. Sometimes he thought he could feel Eurydice's breath on the back of his neck. And still he looked ahead. He made his way through the tunnel of stone. And then at last he was out of the cave and breathing the fresh air of the living world. Above him the sky was bright with shining stars. Soon, he thought to himself, soon the dawn will break and the light of the sun will shine on my face.

But as Eurydice was following Orpheus, she caught her foot on a stone, she tripped and she fell. Orpheus heard her stumble and without thinking he turned to catch her in his arms. He tried to break her fall and for a single moment he saw her face, pale beneath the silver stars. And then his arms closed around empty air and she was gone. In the land of many guests, the third Fate cut the thread of Eurydice's life for the second time. And this time there would be no mending it.

Orpheus turned, he ran back into the cave, he journeyed down into darkness until he came to the edge of the oily black water. He shouted her name and there was no answer. And then the three-headed dog Cerberus came, growling and snarling and snapping at his ankles; and Charon the ancient ferryman cursed him and spat at him. And Orpheus knew there could be no return to the land of the dead. So he made his way back to the living world and he devoted himself to his music, which was more beautiful than ever, woven through with a silver thread of sorrow. And Orpheus never saw Eurydice again. Never.

At least, not in this world. But some people say that when he died, many years later, Charon the ferryman was waiting for him. He carried Orpheus over the oily black water and as he stepped onto the bank at the far side, like all the others, he forgot everything. He joined the drifting, oblivious hosts of the dead. But Persephone had seen him. And she remembered him and she felt pity stirring in her heart. She reached forwards and touched Orpheus' forehead with the tip of her finger. And in that moment his memory returned. And then Persephone touched Eurydice's forehead and she too remembered everything. And the two lovers found one another, in that shadowy kingdom, and they fell into one another's arms.

And even to this day, some say, they walk together, talking and laughing, sometimes arm in arm. Sometimes Eurydice walks ahead and Orpheus follows. And sometimes Orpheus walks ahead, knowing that he can look over his shoulder and his Eurydice will always be there.