

The
METAMORPHOSES
of OVID

A NEW VERSE TRANSLATION BY

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BOOK X

Orpheus & Eurydice · Cyparissus ·

Orpheus' Prologue · Ganymede · Hyacinthus · The Cerastes ·

The Propoetides · Pygmalion · Myrrha & Cinyras · The Birth of Adonis ·

Venus & Adonis · Atalanta & Hippomenes ·

The Fate of Adonis

BUT HYMEN HAD TO LEAVE the isle of Crete.
 Clad in his saffron-colored cloak, he cleaved
 the never-ending air until he reached
 the home of the Cauconians in Thrace;
 for he had heard the voice of Orpheus,
 who was to wed—who pleaded for his presence.
 He came—but came in vain. He did not bless
 the rite with sacred utterance; his face
 displayed no joy; he brought no hope, no grace.
 Even the torch he held kept sputtering:
 eyes teared and smarted from the smoke; no flame,
 however much he shook that brand, would blaze.

The start was sad—and sadder still, the end.
 The bride, just wed, met death; for even as
 she crossed the meadows with her Naiad friends,
 she stepped upon a snake; the viper sank
 its teeth into her ankle.

Orpheus wept
 within the upper world; but when his share
 of long lament was done, the poet dared
 to cross the gate of Taenarus, to seek
 his wife among the Shades consigned to Styx.
 Among the fluttering clouds, the phantom forms
 of those who had been buried, he drew close
 to both Proserpina and Pluto, he
 who rules the dead, the joyless kingdom's king.
 Then Orpheus plucked his lyre as he sang:

“O gods who rule the world beneath the earth,
 the world to which all those of mortal birth
 descend—if I may speak the truth to you,
 without the subterfuge that liars use,
 I've not come here to see dark Tartarus,
 nor have I come to chain the monster-son
 Medusa bore, that horror whose three necks
 bear bristling serpents. This has brought me here:

I seek my wife: she stepped upon a viper,
 a snake that shot his venom into her
 young body, robbing her of years of life.
 I'll not deny that I have tried: I wish
 that I had had the power to resist.
 But Love has won; to him I must submit.
 Within the upper world, he has much fame,
 but I'm not sure if here that god has gained
 renown—though I do hope so; if the tale
 they tell of an abduction long ago
 is not a lie, why then you, too, do owe
 your union to the force of Love. And now
 I pray you, by these fearful sites and by
 the silences of this immense abyss,
 reknit the severed threads, restore the life—
 undone too quickly—of Eurydice.
 For all of us are yours to rule by right;
 our stay above is brief; when that is done,
 we all must—sooner, later—speed to one
 same dwelling place. We all shall take this way:
 our final home is here; the human race
 must here submit to your unending sway.
 She, too, will yet be yours when she has lived
 in full the course of her allotted years.
 I ask you only this: lend her to me.
 But if the Fates deny my wife this gift,
 then I shall stay here, too, I won't go back;
 and you can then rejoice—you'll have two deaths."

The bloodless shades shed tears: they heard his plea,
 the chant the Thracian had accompanied
 with chords upon his lyre. Tantalus
 no longer tried to catch the fleeing waves;
 Ixion's wheel stood still—entranced, amazed;
 the vultures did not prey on Tityus' liver;
 the Danaids left their urns; and Sisyphus,
 you sat upon your stone. It's even said
 that, moved by Orpheus' song, the Furies wept—

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the only tears the Furies ever shed.
Nor could Proserpina, nor he himself,
the ruler of the lower world, refuse
the plea of Orpheus of Rhodope.

They called Eurydice. She was among
the recent dead; as she advanced, her steps
were faltering—her wound still brought distress.
The Thracian poet took her hand: he led
his wife away—but heard the gods' command:
his eyes must not turn back until he'd passed
the valley of Avernus. Just one glance
at her, and all he had received would be
lost—irretrievably.

Their upward path
was dark and steep; the mists they met were thick;
the silences, unbroken. But at last,
they'd almost reached the upper world, when he,
afraid that she might disappear again
and longing so to see her, turned to gaze
back at his wife. At once she slipped away—
and down. His arms stretched out convulsively
to clasp and to be clasped in turn, but there
was nothing but the unresisting air.
And as she died again, Eurydice
did not reproach her husband. (How could she
have faulted him except to say that he
loved her indeed?) One final, faint "Farewell"—
so weak it scarcely reached his ears—was all
she said. Then, back to the abyss, she fell.

And when that second death had struck his wife,
the poet—stunned—was like the man whose fright
on seeing Cerberus, three-headed hound
enchained by Hercules, was so complete
that he was not set free from fear until,
his human nature gone, he had become

a body totally transformed—to stone.
 Or one might liken Orpheus instead
 to Olenus, who took the blame himself
 for his Lethaea's arrogance when she—
 unfortunately—boasted of her beauty:
 Lethaea, you and he were once two hearts
 whom love had joined; but now you are two rocks
 that Ida holds on its well-watered slopes.

But then—when he had found his speech once more—
 the poet pleaded, begging Charon for
 a second chance to reach the farther shore;
 the boatman chased him off. For seven days,
 huddled along the banks of Styx, he stayed;
 there he shunned Ceres' gifts—he had no taste
 for food; he called on desperation, pain,
 and tears—with these alone he could sustain
 himself. But after Orpheus had arraigned
 the gods of Erebus for cruelty,
 he left; he sought the peak of Rhodope
 and Haemus' heights, where north winds never cease.

Three times the ever-wheeling sun had come
 to Pisces' watery sign. Three years had gone;
 and Orpheus, in all that time, had shunned
 the love of women; this, for his misfortune,
 or for his having pledged his heart to one—
 and to no other—woman. That did not
 prevent their wanting him; and many sought
 the poet—all those women met repulse
 and grief. Indeed, he was the one who taught
 the Thracian men this practice: they bestow
 their love on tender boys, and so enjoy
 firstfruits, the brief springtime, the flowers of youth.

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