



GEORG KAFKA

THE DEATH OF ORPHEUS

The work of young poet Georg Kafka, a distant relative of Franz Kafka, was highly regarded by older writers and scholars in the ghetto. Emil Utitz, professor of philosophy, psychology, and aesthetics at Prague's German University, asked Philipp Manes<sup>1</sup> to support Georg Kafka's work and spoke at the premiere of *The Death of Orpheus*.<sup>2</sup> Manes himself described Kafka as "a true poetic talent" and compared him with the young Hugo von Hofmannsthal.<sup>3</sup> Two of Georg Kafka's poems, "Death Prayer" (*Todesgebet*) and "Blessing of the Night" (*Segen der Nacht*), were published in 1960.<sup>4</sup> A third, untitled poem was published in the Terezín/Theresienstadt diary of Philipp Manes.<sup>5</sup> His dramatic poem *The Death of Orpheus* was found in the archives of the Jewish Museum in Prague.<sup>6</sup>

## THE AUTHOR

Georg Kafka was born in Teplice-Šanov/Teplitz-Schönau on February 15, 1921. He began his secondary education there but graduated in 1939

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IMAGE 11.1 (facing page) **Souvenir poster for the performance of Georg Kafka's *Orpheus*.**

Courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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**1** Philipp Manes was head of the Manes Group, which organized many German-language lectures and dramatic readings in the ghetto. For a list of the Manes Group's activities see the Terezín Memorial, inv. no. PT 3981.

**2** There is no title on the original script. H. G. Adler called it *The Death of Orpheus* (*Der Tod des Orpheus*) and Manes called it simply *Orpheus*, which is also the title that appears on the preserved poster. See Adler, *Theresienstadt*, p. 759; Manes, *Als ob's ein Leben wär*, pp. 148, 245; and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Morris and Hildegard Henschel Collection, inv. no. RG-24.021.

**3** Manes, *Als ob's ein Leben wär*, p. 148.

**4** Manfred Schlösser (ed.), *An den Wind geschrieben. Lyrik der Freiheit. Gedichte der Jahre 1933–1945* (Darmstadt: Agora 1960), pp. 211, 220.

**5** Manes, *Als ob's ein Leben wär*, p. 351.

**6** Shoah History Archive, Terezín Collection (T), inv. no. 326.

from the German-language *Gymnasium* on Štěpanská street in Prague. He attended a teacher-training course organized by the Jewish community in Prague and taught for two years until he was deported with his parents from Prague to Terezín/Theresienstadt on July 23, 1942.<sup>7</sup>

In the ghetto, Georg Kafka wrote fairy tales, poems, and dramatic texts, and translated contemporary Czech writers into German. In his diary Manes describes how Kafka's employment provided him with rare access to writing materials:

During the day he worked with the files of the central archives of the ghetto [. . .] and at night, when his duties allowed (when outgoing transport lists were being prepared, sometimes the typists worked all night, for several nights in a row), he sat at the typewriter, transcribing his creations.<sup>8</sup>

Kafka's first work written for the stage, the prose drama *Alexander in Jerusalem*, was not selected for presentation by the Manes Group. However, Manes considered the young author's next submission, *The Death of Orpheus*, to be "a lyrically mature work revealing great facility with language and full mastery of form."<sup>9</sup> In the fall of 1943 the Manes Group celebrated their two-hundred-and-fiftieth meeting by premiering the work as a staged reading. In the list of the Manes Group's activities only one actor is named: Friedrich Lerner.<sup>10</sup> As Manes wrote in his diary, Lerner read the poem alone "after a reading with the roles distributed did not result in the necessary unity of style. It was a great success for the young poet and for the performer."<sup>11</sup>

In the spring of 1944 Kafka wrote what was to be his last work for the stage: a puppet play titled *The Golem*.<sup>12</sup> His father died in March

<sup>7</sup> Jürgen Serke, *Böhmische Dörfer: Wanderungen durch eine verlassene literarische Landschaft* (Vienna: Zsolnay, 1987), p. 450.

<sup>8</sup> Manes, *Als ob's ein Leben wär*, p. 149.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Terezín Memorial, inv. no. PT 3981.

<sup>11</sup> Manes, *Als ob's ein Leben wär*, p. 150.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 269. The text *The Golem* (*Der Golem*) has not been found, but a review is preserved in the Theresienstadt Collection in the archives of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, file O.64/078.

1944, and when his mother was included in the transport scheduled to depart on May 15, 1944, he joined her voluntarily. Even after his deportation he remained a poetic presence in the ghetto: one of his works was awarded first prize in a poetry contest held in August 1944.<sup>13</sup> Kafka did not live to accept this recognition. His mother perished, probably murdered in the gas chambers of Auschwitz immediately upon arrival, and Kafka died months later in Schwarzheide.<sup>14</sup>

### THE SCRIPT

H. G. Adler noted that *The Death of Orpheus* was “without reference to Theresienstadt or the period.”<sup>15</sup> It is true that in his poem Kafka does not engage with the day-to-day details of the ghetto. However, the work does appear to reflect certain aspects of his own life; for example, it includes an emotionally wrenching scene between Orpheus and his mother, who rarely appears in treatments of the legend. But Kafka goes far beyond the autobiographical. In his lyrical rhymed text—which I have translated as blank verse, following the rhythm of the original as closely as possible—he addresses the most profound questions that confronted his fellow prisoners: How much is one prepared to sacrifice for a loved one? What is the nature of artists’ responsibility toward those who rely on them? Can one make peace with death by embracing it? Although Orpheus inevitably perishes, Kafka’s work does not end in despair. His friends and companions adopt his verses as their own, perpetuating his work even after his death.

**13** Manes, *Als ob's ein Leben wär*, p. 391.

**14** Adler, *Theresienstadt*, p. 619.

**15** Adler, *Theresienstadt*, p. 759. According to Adler the reading was repeated often and with great success. The Manes Group’s own records list four performances in 1943 and none in 1944. See *ibid.*, p. 602; and the Terezín Memorial, inv. no. PT 3981.

## THE AUTHOR

**GEORG** (in Czech, Jiří) **KAFKA** was born on February 15, 1921. He was deported from Prague to Terezín/Theresienstadt on July 23, 1942 and voluntarily joined a transport to accompany his mother, which departed for Auschwitz on May 15, 1944. He perished in Schwarzheide.

## THE ACTOR

**FRIEDRICH (BEDŘICH) LERNER**, born on April 14, 1906, was deported from Tábor to Terezín/Theresienstadt on November 16, 1942, and to Auschwitz on September 28, 1944. He perished.

## THE DEATH OF ORPHEUS

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### PROLOGUE

*Alkaios, rustically dressed and holding a shepherd's staff, stands before the closed curtain.*

ALKAIOS. Alkaios is my name, just a shepherd boy, the same  
As all my friends, my brothers and companions.  
My home is here, among these verdant canyons,  
The quiet valleys, dark with dusk and peaceful.  
The poet in our midst, though, loves me most  
And sometimes he regards me dreamily,  
When he, a simple shepherd, like us,  
Joins us by our fire at night and then  
He takes his lute out of its bandolier  
Or plays upon the melancholy pipes.  
Sometimes in harmony, we quietly join in  
And sing along in gentle reverie.

What is it that the poet sees in me?  
Why does he look at me with eyes so lustrous,  
Strangely bright, as he begins to play?  
Mature beyond my years, a boy no longer  
Seventeen years old I'll be in springtime  
But, much more I've experienced, believe me,  
I've been in love before, as you have been,  
But both of us were still so painfully shy,  
We hardly dared exchange a longing glance.  
How should I understand Orpheus's secret?  
What is it that the poet sees in me?

Perhaps *you* could look deep into his heart  
By listening to the rhythm of his verse.  
Play out your life the way that we perform this play,  
Present it earnestly, but oh, never forget:  
It's just a play. Regard our tale,

So quickly here then gone,  
 As a model for your own life, if it pleases you:  
 Love your poet well, the way that we love ours,  
 Be like the legends, the tales that we have told you,  
 Still and sonorous, and with emotion deep.  
 Live with the poet his autumn melancholy  
 And celebrate with him when comes the spring.  
 Then will he love you as he loves his shepherds,  
 And when our brief scenes end, the curtain falls again,  
 You'll leave as much behind, as we leave of our world.

Gentle music, that through the evening drifts  
 And if it pleases the Unseen Ones well  
 Will ring forever as a quiet song . . .

*The curtain rises. It is dark.*

ORPHEUS (*voice*). Oh autumn of the earth, oh, deepest stillness,  
 The restless darkness of my solitude.  
 Whom can I offer these, my tired verses?  
 Flute melody, a sound slowly receding,  
 Oh autumn of the earth, deep solitude . . .

EURYDICE (*voice from afar*). My love, do you still gaze upon the water,  
 A mirror that reflects your gentle mourning?  
 Where are you, Orpheus? My longing's wings  
 Are heavy from the flight to your dreams' realm.

ORPHEUS (*voice*). Now in the evening light the earth resembles  
 My sleepy, languishing Eurydice.  
 My song, it ripened in our love's warm sunlight,  
 Two verses, oh, were we, within a poem of dreams.  
 Who played, back then, upon the soft and gentle  
 Strings of the lyre, glowing in the moonlight?  
 Oh autumn of the earth, oh deepest stillness . . .

*Slowly daylight breaks. Shepherds bring offerings of fruit and  
 wreaths of autumn flowers to the altar of Persephone.*

FIRST SHEPHERD. Through empty fields there blows a cold, dark wind.

SECOND SHEPHERD. Pan no more frightens nymphs out in the meadows.

THIRD SHEPHERD. I feel now like I did when I, a dreaming child,  
Was left alone, abandoned by my playmates.

OLD SHEPHERD. And without joy this year were our poor harvests,  
The autumn spent itself in stifling ground,  
The vineyard grapes that usually glow dark crimson,  
Like tongues of flame entwined, have not grown plump  
with nectar . . .

FIRST SHEPHERD. The gods are long departed from our valley  
And far away they play their merry games . . .

SECOND SHEPHERD. The peasant reaches, empty-handed, skyward,  
Up toward a God so infinitely far . . .

ORPHEUS (*voice from afar*). Oh autumn of the Earth, deep solitude . . .

THIRD SHEPHERD. Fog rises on the river banks already  
And muffles cries of fawns lost in the mist . . .

ORPHEUS (*voice from afar*). Where fades away my song, my  
happiness? My woe?

OLD SHEPHERD. We walk, slowly descending the staircase of our hours  
While sun and flowers alternate with snow . . .  
Death is a mystery . . .

FOURTH SHEPHERD. The fruit becomes the seed; however, its sweet  
juice  
A blessing granted by the generous gods.

FIRST SHEPHERD. Our autumn had no radiance, no vigor . . .

SECOND SHEPHERD. To know of spring and autumn, how each  
completes the other,  
(*Pointing to Persephone's altar*) Ask this maiden, who holds in  
slender hands  
The secrets of the earth and all its blessings . . .

CHORUS OF SHEPHERDS (*Strophe*). Persephoneia, oh!<sup>16</sup> Lovely one  
who deep in Pluto's chambers

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<sup>16</sup> As in the original script, the chorus uses the Homeric form of the name Persephoneia; elsewhere the form Persephone is used.



Sets blooming flowers ablaze, over the tables of stone  
 You, consecrated to death, your gestures of longing entangled  
 Caught in the folds of your dress, in folds that descend restlessly  
 And in your longing's footfalls, in reaches of Earth's endless  
     vastness,  
 Which you, with strict-measured steps, encircle, a wandering  
     shadow.

*(Antiphon)* Persephoneia, comforter among the shadows,  
 Maidenly, gentle, glowing with warm loving light,  
 You who will always return, you, consecrated to life  
 Leaving the twilight-filled house, you carry the earthenware  
     jug  
 Filled to the rim with the dark, with poppies, and bearing  
     the weight  
 The burden of suffering and might, from Pluto's terrible house,  
 Hold it tight, girl, in your arms, mourning your fate and  
     yourself  
 Into eternity, into the spring and beyond.

**CHORUS.** Persephoneia, oh, you who the ominous path  
 Cheerfully walk and the sorrow  
 Of falling night you preserve, held in your sweet smiling  
     features,  
 You set blooming flowers ablaze, over the tables of stone  
 You, the one in whose face, as if in the most precious vessel  
 Life and death meet and make a heavenly wine.  
 Grant to our earth renewed fertility . . .

**ORPHEUS** (*voice from afar*). Oh melody of deepest loneliness!

**ALKAIOS.** Leave her in peace; your chorus of petitions  
 Is like a forest where she'll lose her way.  
 Persephone, so gentle, lost herself  
 In silence, standing just before the gate  
 To the garden of your grievances that only baffle her.  
 Just one has found her heart, as if young earth  
 Has yielded herself humbly to the plow:  
 He offered up his songs upon her altar fair

And to his sweet tones she inclined her ear.

Just one, just Orpheus, was by this girl beloved . . .

**OLD SHEPHERD.** The poets, they are like old wells, in ruins,  
From which the waters never cease to run,  
Young maidens come to cool their warm, flushed faces  
In fresh water, before night begins . . .

**ALKAIOS.** Orpheus bound the day in clasps of bronze  
And shattered the clay vessel of midnight  
He brought to her, before the night had ended,  
The glowing jewels, as light as birds in flight:  
The shy rhymes that he had for her invented.

**FIRST SHEPHERD.** She kept him with her in her girlish night  
Returned again, again, yet never had her fill  
Of her singer and his merry dances.

**SECOND SHEPHERD.** And now on all the paths deep silence reigns . . .

**ALKAIOS.** She loved the figures traced out in his songs  
And danced them all with feet as light as spring,

**OLD SHEPHERD.** And cheerful were the pastures in our valley  
Full of fruit and glowing, lustrous, sweet . . .

**ALKAIOS.** All thanks to Orpheus; it was to him we owed  
The greatness of the year and harvests rich.  
An ecstasy seized beasts and trees and stones when  
He played upon the lyre; they swayed, intoxicated  
In his emotions' evening-quiet bay.  
He simply smiled and he remained alone  
And only played full of sweet drunkenness  
Until, his passion spent, his great heart finally still  
And lost in contemplation of the gods,  
He stopped and set the golden lyre aside . . .

**FIRST SHEPHERD.** The earth was heavy with fertility.

**SECOND SHEPHERD.** His song was celebrated in all the fields' furrows  
The juice pressed from the grape, the sweet tone of his harp  
His love matured in slowly ripening fruit  
On ancient trees deep in the olive groves.

THIRD SHEPHERD. Where is he now? Has he left us alone?

FOURTH SHEPHERD. The song of Orpheus, it penetrates the earth . . .

FIRST SHEPHERD. He sings no more? Does he not know his homeland?

ALKAIOS. Although the landscape lives in all his features,

He's silent now. He has not taken up

The lyre, he plays no more, since his beloved left . . .

FOURTH SHEPHERD. Call Orpheus! Call him, ask him for a song . . .

OLD SHEPHERD. Yes, call Orpheus, invoke the memories.

ORPHEUS (*voice from afar*). Farewell—oh, a word composed of  
dusk . . .

ALKAIOS. Our hands are as if bound and strangely heavy,

He was the mediator of all our quiet wishes

And was the ferryman of our poor hours

Into which, like a boat, our dreams we gently loaded,

Then rowed away, in yet-unknown directions

Toward fulfillment on night's quiet shores . . .

OLD SHEPHERD (*Strophe*). Orpheus, oh where do you wander, on  
wild and overgrown pathways

You who have left us now, deep in the moon absorbed.

Are you the guest of Narcissus? Of Apollo? Of dancing  
Oreades?<sup>17</sup>

Or do you dream alone

Of the lost happiness of blissful twosomeness?

ORPHEUS (*voice, closer*). I am the lute that carries all your sadness . . .

OLD SHEPHERD (*Antiphon*). Hear, Orpheus, for you,

The fast-wilting meadows cry out,

The longing of perishing flowers, closing their petals forever,

Weeping and calling, abandoned are we too . . .

ALKAIOS. We are a drink that spoils without you . . .

ORPHEUS (*voice, quite close*). The lyre, it falls silent when love dies.

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<sup>17</sup> In Greek mythology, an Oread or Orestiad was a type of nymph who lived in mountains, valleys, and ravines.

**CHORUS.** Orpheus, you fall like the snow from distant skies, and veil  
 Us in a blanket of words, oh, wrap us up in your poem  
 Come to us, veil and star, feeling the pulse of the earth,  
 Who gives herself freely to none, surrenders to you and is yours,  
 When you her harvest-weary, her dusty brow you soothe.

Be an island in the breaking waves,  
 A towering column in the sanctuary,  
 Bright-colored flowers in the days of grayness  
 Be an answer to our darkest questions  
 And sound, like the sea, eternal beauty's fame!

**ALKAIOS.** Behold our hands, imploringly we raise them!  
*Orpheus, dressed all in black, appears on the rock.*

**ORPHEUS.** Alone

Upon this peak  
 I know neither death nor life  
 Only the clouds, that distant winds are weaving,  
 Travel with me as companions now.  
 This peak, drenched always in the morning's glow  
 This mountain, my home  
 The blooming meadows are my countenance  
 The skylark's song, it is my handiwork  
 Eternal, like God's heaven, never ceasing,  
 Only wandering clouds my dream companions  
 And now my home, it is this peak  
 Alone.

You, however, only weakly mirror  
 The eternal flame.  
 You, who will never know God,  
 Nothing is yours.

You pile your ruins higher, longing to approach him  
 You dream of marble towers, of spirit fixed in stone  
 But you will never know the longed-for union.

Alone, upon this peak, I know I know neither death nor life . . .

**ALKAIOS.** This Orpheus was not the man, the master  
 The loving friend who bade us fond farewell.

The singer of the songs that wove their spell  
To teach his friends humility, surrender . . .

**ORPHEUS.** Alkaios, 'tis you, who of friendship speaks?

I love you more than all the other shepherds  
And from your face, your feminine features pale,  
I read the echo of soft melodies,  
That swarmed like bees from lute-strings resonating  
And sometimes, glowing like the light of stars,  
Come drifting through the silence of my nights.

**ALKAIOS.** Oh Orpheus, Orpheus, why are you silent now?

Oh vessel brimming over with song intoxicating . . .

**ORPHEUS.** What other choice remains to me, my friend?

What do you know, child, of the land of poppies  
What do you know of longing just to rest,  
Your heart still pure, like whitest alabaster . . .

**ALKAIOS.** Pure are you too, pure like me, as if from the sea arisen . . .

**ORPHEUS.** Already etched into my ageing features

Are sweet and guilty pleasures, vice of the lyre's strings  
For boys like you, eyes dreamy, heavy-lidded,  
The more mature squander themselves away  
And crowns that would incite no king to envy,  
They place, so tenderly, with tender fingers  
Upon a boy's long and play-tangled hair . . .

**OLD SHEPHERD.** You've not yet reached the fullness of your years

Illuminated by an early glow  
Your words are now of one who sees his end  
And from the lively doings of his fellows  
Turns his tired faced away, in silence dark.

**ORPHEUS.** Time is the only thing that brings us wisdom.

Your autumn of maturity you reach  
In a flash of sudden understanding  
When after years of wandering, you pause briefly  
To bless your bread and wine at silent hearths.

**CHORUS.** For us, oh Orpheus, reach again for your lute,

Sing of your life's sweet fullness and abandon,

That we may enjoy the gods' secrets, revealed by you and  
 your music,  
 Enjoy them at cheerfully laden banquet tables.

**ORPHEUS.** The lute, my friends, expect no more to hear it.  
 Just melodies that echo in the winds.  
 These verses, oh, that you so deeply craved,  
 And all the songs of mine that so beguile you,  
 Reverberations, that with me now fade . . .

**OLD SHEPHERD.** The gods' violin are you. Don't you feel the hand  
 That holds you fast and plays upon your strings?

**ORPHEUS.** Oh, happy was I too, 'til in the shadowland,  
 To which a narrow path winds down among the shades,  
 Eurydice, beloved, too soon bade me farewell

**ALKAIOS.** Show us the lute, whose tone we all so long for,  
 Please, Orpheus, if only from afar . . .

**CHORUS.** Brave is the heart of the man who looks upon eternal beauty  
 He swings himself into the path of melodious, circling stars  
 Lift up the holiest harp, held in the evening aloft  
 Orpheus, show us the holy and shimmering lyre  
 Show us the strings that Apollo has chosen to play,  
 Like a torch gleaming at Bacchus's nightly feasts . . .

**ORPHEUS.** It lies submerged, sunk deep in blackest water.  
 I broke it on the cliff that stands along the banks,  
 Then let it slip into the watery darkness.  
 It seemed to me the strings I'd torn and broken  
 Sang quietly, sang on from darkest depths . . .

**CHORUS.** Alas, the lute, now submerged,  
 No more song under the starlight  
 Deep-flowing currents sound within its strings  
 And in the depths even the Tritons weep.

**DRYAD.** Alas, no more song under the starlight.

**CHORUS.** Just as with Icarus's powerful wingstrokes  
 Hope is what carried us up, hope was a gift from your lyre,  
 Burned by the heat of the sun, a sun wrapped in black  
 mourning veils

We plummet now into the sea, singed by the heat of the flames  
Falling and falling, down, deep in the house of the demons.

DRYAD. Alas, no more song under the starlight!

CHORUS. And in the depths even the Tritons weep.

ORPHEUS. It was your fate, to live in troubled times.

CHORUS. Oh, all the light fades away!

Cheerful wellsprings dry up,  
Poisonous fog starts to rise,  
Poet, your song dissipates . . .

DRYAD. Oh, all the light fades away!

CHORUS. Shepherd, your flock scatters wide!

ALKAIOS. And evenings, standing as if before locked coffers

The maidens listen in the dreamy distance,  
The girls who loved the clear sound of your voice,  
They wait for hours for a little song  
Stay wakeful long before they finally rest . . .

DRYAD (*from afar*). Alas, no more song under the starlight . . .

ORPHEUS. Oh, if my lute were not already buried,

The girlish thing, I'd give it now to you.  
For just above your head, my slim young shepherd boy,  
I hear the wings of my destiny beating . . .  
A note unknown is ringing through my halls  
The earth, it sinks beneath my every step  
It seemed to me today that I heard voices,  
That called me home from my accustomed path.  
Today I watched the leaves, so slowly, strangely falling,  
As if they bore no more the weight of wishes . . .

You are still too young, all these things to fathom,  
The autumn lies so lightly on your shoulders,  
But one like me, with feet weary from wandering  
Through lengthy melodies, he loves the word "perhaps."

Perhaps this is the day of which we've never spoken,  
The hour made for us since the beginning,

Will finally take us up, like a tiny boat  
That rocks until the children fall asleep . . .

**ALKAIOS.** Why do you, Orpheus, long so much for death?

**ORPHEUS.** I've seen our first creations fall to ruins  
What we've of late acquired, it slips away . . .

**OLD SHEPHERD.** Yes, downward leads the staircase of our hours . . .

**ALKAIOS.** But one like you who moves through the fast-ebbing  
And grayish days in mourning, a Titan,  
He gives the shoreless streams of featureless endeavor  
New meaning and direction for his friends.  
To all the pain of life his heart lies open,  
Vanished nations rise and live again in him.  
His dream no more a thing, from which he late awakes,  
For deep within his eyes, the very stars are born  
And our God rests in him, as in brocaded night . . .

**ORPHEUS.** So you, a child, explain my little lifetime.  
Oh hours, the hours that I have spent this way . . .

**OLD SHEPHERD.** One moment of fulfillment has more meaning  
Than a hundred years of waiting before a portal closed.

**ORPHEUS.** Love was the only thing that freed my spirit.

**CHORUS.** May he who, like you, has lost Eurydice  
Put on the black robes of mourning, as if for eternity.  
Wander long roads in his solitude  
Silent long, like one lost in a trance.<sup>18</sup>  
But he shall one day reach for new robes of white,  
Shall stride with vigor, as if born anew  
To rejoin the choir of his companions.

**ORPHEUS.** Give back to me, ye gods, one single day  
to savor from the springtime of my youth  
To spend it at my lover's feet  
And play upon the lute.

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**18** In the original, "Schweige lang, entrückt wie ein Stylit" (Silent long, transported like a Stylite). Stylites, or pillar-saints, were Christian ascetics who in the early days of the Byzantine Empire stood on pillars, preaching, fasting, and praying.



And only one more thing would I then tell her.

I am with you

And even death I'll face with you, together,

But death would find no open door

Into our quiet dwelling, warm with sunset.

He'd turn away, majestically and still

Yet smiling gently, lost in memories

From our threshold he'd slowly walk away.

**CHORUS.** Sing, oh Orpheus, your departed beloved,  
To the cliffs and to the stones, to roots, to trees and forests  
Soon you will be with her, whom leave-taking no longer  
plagues,  
Mystically joined in the song, rhythmically dancing the  
dance . . .

**ORPHEUS.** He who, like me, has lost Eurydice,  
No longer knows the word that you've created.  
He listens only to the passing hours<sup>19</sup>  
In silence waits until the voices call . . .

**HERMES** (*voice from afar*). Orpheus!

**DRYAD** (*closer*). Orpheus!

**HERMES** (*voice, very close*). Orpheus!

**ALKAIOS** (*fearfully*). A stranger comes in search of Orpheus . . .

*Hermes appears at the altar of Persephone. Under his right arm  
he carries an object wrapped in black cloth.*

**HERMES.** I seek the singer Orpheus. Will I find him here with you?

**FIRST SHEPHERD.** The singer Orpheus—my friend, we seek him too . . .

**HERMES.** And who stands there, still, as if made of stone,

In deepest sorrow high upon the cliff?

**ALKAIOS** (*trying to divert his attention*). Oh, one of our priests, who  
speaks a thankful prayer . . .

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**19** In the original, "Lauscht nur den vielzuträgen Horen" (Listens only to the overburdened Horae). The Horae, or Hours, were three goddesses controlling orderly life. In one of their aspects they represented the three seasons the Greeks recognized: spring, summer, and autumn.

ORPHEUS. He does indeed; for he who now approaches  
Appears to be a messenger of the gods.

HERMES. Orpheus, I have also recognized you.  
The poet knows the envoy of his god  
To him, who in his homeland's oft a stranger,  
Sometimes the heavens extend a brotherly hand . . .

ORPHEUS. And so you found the way. Who has sent you here?  
Was it Grace? Of that I need no more.  
Or Hate? Oh, everything I owned, it has been taken  
And my hands are bare, as empty as my halls  
The shining world is hazy, without color.  
What is it that the gods could give to me?  
Oh, everything I owned, it has been taken  
Alone, upon this peak, I know neither death nor life.

HERMES. But some still think of you, though from afar  
Following your dreams and wakefulness.  
No one who lives for beauty lives alone . . .

ORPHEUS. Oh autumn of the Earth, deep solitude . . .

HERMES. And there is one, who over all your days  
Hovers like a cloud, one ever longing  
That just one smile will reconcile your world.  
Oh Orpheus, what should I tell that maiden?

ORPHEUS (*as if speaking to Eurydice*). Is this not more than what I  
meant to you,

Together then,  
When over my distressed nature  
You often wept . . .?

Of all the words that we gave one another  
Some stayed with me,  
Refrain beloved, sweet in my dark lifetime.  
"I am with you."

I am with you, when through the leafless hedges  
The fall wind blows  
And in the fountains' bowls of whitest marble  
The nymph laments . . .

HERMES. Your greeting will I take into that darkest house  
 Set gently there before her on the table  
 Of metal cold, like flowers in a vase  
 That one finds, unexpected, inside an empty room.

ALKAIOS. But you were likely sent by Apollo here to us  
 To give Orpheus all of that god's beauty . . .

ORPHEUS. And what is beauty? Just an apparition  
 Existing in our gaze, not in the thing itself  
 That with its form sinks down into the grave.

ALKAIOS. Oh source of nameless pain, to hear these words from  
 you . . .

ORPHEUS. The essence of these things I know too well  
 To doubt that they will end in disappointment.

ALKAIOS. The wisdom of Athena guides your words.

ORPHEUS. And what is wisdom? A cloak of resignation,  
 We wrap around our shuddering shoulders, standing  
 Before eternity, in silent courts of judgment  
 Where we attempt to justify our lives  
 And bear the final coldness of their sentence . . .

HERMES. I bring you none of that. I bring you only love . . .

ORPHEUS. And what is love . . .

ALKAIOS. Master, hush now, hush,  
 And leave to us this last unanswered question!  
 Ask what is life, and why I must endure it,  
 What are the gods, to whom I bow in prayer,  
 Of all else, master, ask your mournful questions,  
 Like sharpened blades they penetrate my heart,  
 But what is love . . . Master, hush, oh Orpheus, hush . . .

ORPHEUS. Do you know what love is? It is this very silence.  
 Concealing from the ones we love the knowledge  
 Of all the horror meant for us alone.

HERMES. But now I have grown weary of this burden.

*Hermes puts down the covered gift, leaning it against a column  
 of Persephone's temple.*

ORPHEUS. Who was it, Hermes? Who has sent you to us?

HERMES. A name that rings for you with tender echoes.  
Eurydice . . .

ORPHEUS. The sweet smell of decay arises from such gifts  
That, from the depths, the dead to us deliver.  
As if, with their pale, outstretched hands, they tempt us  
To join them on the paths that lead down to their  
stronghold . . .

ALKAIOS. What lies concealed within these wrappings, Hermes?

HERMES. I do not know. This often is our mission,  
Delivering to lovers gifts unknown,  
Because the meaning shared between the two of them  
Is damaged if the uninitiated  
Presume to shed some light on the nature of their bond,  
The secret intimacy of the pair . . .

ORPHEUS. So let me free this dark, mysterious gift  
From the layers of black cloth that now conceal it . . .

HERMES. Now I will set out quickly on my journey  
And I, who carried through the night this darkness,  
Will bring bright words to her, that quiet girl  
And I will be your love's true messenger . . . (*Exits quickly.*)

ORPHEUS. I beg you all, please, leave me now as well . . .

*The shepherds exit. Alkaios hesitates until he, the last, joins the others.*

ORPHEUS. Only you, Alkaios, you could almost stay here.  
Only almost. Go, child, how lovely, look,  
The fluttering leaves drift gently into evening . . .  
*He slowly climbs down from the rock and approaches Eurydice's gift. He stops in the center of the stage.*  
I was, beloved, ivy on the pathways  
That gently bordered and enclosed your steps.  
And often lay, when trapped in anxious nightmares,  
My head upon your lap.

And like a young wind tenderly I played  
 Within the dusky, soft folds of your dress  
 And sometimes I regarded your slim hands clasped together  
 Like young girls, weary but suffused with joy.

Oh, these soft hands, beds planted with white flowers  
 You were a springtime garden, in which I finally bloomed  
 A lullaby that wove its way around me  
 Your smile was, for my deeds, a rich reward.

I was a current that toward far shores flowed  
 But you, the water vessel fair of form  
 In which a maiden gently raised me from the void  
 And carried to her garden like a lamp  
 To pour me out upon the darkish blooms . . .

I was at prayer and you, you were the Word  
 While I was formless, you a perfect whole  
 I was so young, but you remained unsullied  
 An empty space was I, but you the site

Of the Garden of the World, God's hiding place  
 You covered me, in nights of expectation  
 With wilting leaves, composed of fairy tales.  
 When I awoke, you were no longer by me

And I found not a trace left by your gentle footsteps.  
 Where now is all that bliss? Where all that we have suffered?  
 Only your silent kiss I feel upon my cheek . . .

*While uttering the last few words, Orpheus has come gradually  
 closer to the covered gift. Now he stands immediately before it.*

Now here lies the secret you had brought to me  
 I often scattered violets in your hair  
 But I recall the gift that pleased you most:  
 When I made up a little song for you.  
 What present for me, child, have you wrapped in black?  
 Were you afraid that I'd laugh at your gift?  
 Is it so poor? Had you found nothing more

In Hades' empty hallways, than a brightly colored stone,  
And sent it, hesitating, in deepest secrecy,  
To me it would be rare and ever-precious . . .

*He reaches out to remove the covers. Algea suddenly steps out from the background and speaks to him. He lets his hands fall and turns around.*

ALGEA. Oh Orpheus, touch no gift that death has sent you,  
Touch not this thing. Just once more be my child  
The way you were before. Look, I am old, my son  
And whimsical, as such old women are.  
For years now I have asked nothing of you  
Soon you shall hear my voice, my son, no more.  
Look, your mother's hair, that once was golden  
Flows now in snow-white waves back from her brow.  
The time draws near when I shall ask no more.  
Just one last thing you must still do for me  
Do not accept this thing, delivered from the dead,  
Do not touch it. Just once more, be my child,  
Remember all the pain I bore for you . . .

ORPHEUS. My Mother, oh, so long I have not seen you  
You followed your own path, almost like one of them,  
The dead, who you now claim are strange to you.  
Where were you, Mother? What so burdens you?

ALGEA. Orpheus, I've been weeping all this time . . .

ORPHEUS. I too have lived a long time without cheer . . .

ALGEA. Why, my Orpheus, have I only wept,  
Have kept my distance, seeing you from afar?  
Only because I knew you were in mourning  
And sorrow found me when my path crossed yours . . .

ORPHEUS. It is no fault of mine, that I no longer laugh . . .

ALGEA. You are no more my child. Who took you, son, from me?

ORPHEUS. Oh Mother, life has done all this to us . . .

ALGEA. When still a boy, you dreamed and laughed just like the  
others . . .

ORPHEUS. A boy, he dreams of charging right into the fray  
Hair flying, steers his chariot through the battle  
On my head a helmet, reddish gold  
And tongues of flame streak through the darkened sky,  
Meanwhile the pounding of the sea  
Circulates, pulsing, through my veins . . .

ALGEA. Such horrors, Orpheus, have come to pass,  
That I, your mother, almost have to wish  
A quick and painless death had found you then.  
Instead I see you growing ever paler,  
And watch as you stare long into dark river depths  
Haunted by incurable despair.

ORPHEUS. It's often women, suffering and patient  
Who bear the burden of the poet's curse  
As if his passion meant the guilt of secret vices  
And who, driven as he, through dark years headlong rushing  
Stops short upon the goal: eternity.  
His mother is the one who weaves a mantel  
Of loving words to wrap around her son,  
His lover bears it, humbly and in silence  
When he, in his delirium, cries out . . .

ALGEA. If you had only never known the lyre . . .

ORPHEUS. The fire would have consumed me nonetheless.

ALGEA. Happy is he who, never touched by God  
Knows not of fame, knows not the stringed lyre  
Who follows cheerfully his even path  
His eyes reflect no shine, but also see no horrors,  
His evenings without stars, but comfortable and cool  
And saying the word "life," describes a richness vast . . .

ORPHEUS. But I, I was possessed by a rare sorrow  
So early on, and never has it eased.  
My passion was for beauty, that lent its permanence  
To melodies of my beloved flute.

ALGEA. If only you had never met that maiden  
You would be happy, as all shepherds are  
And revel in the beauty of the earth . . .

ORPHEUS. In these long nights I listen to the falling  
 Of raindrops, drenching fields now gray and bare  
 And my heart was as glad to hear the autumn wind  
 As others are to hear a dancing song . . .

ALGEA. Melancholy, sadness? You are not well, my child!

ORPHEUS. And now my home is with the evening wind  
 At quiet hearths I love to sit and watch  
 The way twilight spins slowly 'round the flames  
 A ring of longing, as around young women  
 I often kneel at dusk before the deep blue  
 Of violets shy, embedded in soft grass  
 And wish to be for them a vase so slender  
 And sometimes kneel 'til skies glow grey with dawn.

ALGEA. You're no more used to life among the living  
 Be as you are, and follow your own pathways  
 And laugh sometimes, laugh, Orpheus, and summon  
 Your grey-haired mother when you're filled with cheer  
 And let a flicker brighten her dark nights.  
 And this dark thing now give me as a gift.  
 So long I've had no gift from you. You lock yourself  
 In your own dreams and you need nothing more.  
 But this thing, oh, I often shall admire it  
 And kiss it sometimes. This is from my son!  
 In my dark nights, now desolate and sleepless  
 It will be with me, precious as your voice . . .

*She tries to take Eurydice's gift, to carry it away. Orpheus blocks  
 her way to the column.*

ORPHEUS. This is not for you; Eurydice's love  
 Sent from afar the enigmatic messenger.

ALGEA. Do not accept this gift that death has sent you  
 Your mother begs you, child . . .

ORPHEUS. No, Mother, this is mine,  
 And meant for me and chosen just for me.

ALGEA. But give it to me. Give me this thing.  
 Nothing there. Just a stone



And you were always good. You always listened to me.  
 You'll surely grant me this. I shall be happy then,  
 Through Orpheus's kindness happy. To you it only means . . .

**ORPHEUS.** The essence sweet of a life too early taken.  
 Not yours, oh Mother! This gift, it is mine  
 More than any fruit that my own labors won.  
 It is the longing for a total union  
 With my beloved, oh, who died so young.

**ALGEA.** Strong are the dead, much stronger than the living,  
 In yielding to her will, you have forsaken me.  
 Mighty are those who forgive easily  
 A God, raising his hands in consolation,  
 Lifts up the mother who now only weeps . . .

*She leaves slowly, in a posture of deep mourning. Orpheus reaches  
 for the dark object. Slowly he removes the cover.*

**ORPHEUS.** Just like a child who finally is allowed  
 A treasure, long concealed, to unwrap,  
 That now stands tall, a castle, in all his fantasies  
 So now am I. The landscape of my dreams  
 Lies spread before me now, its rolling hillsides  
 Caressed by a strange, flower-scented breeze . . .

*He has removed the last black cloth and holds the gift in his  
 hands: a golden harp, entwined in black laurel. In the setting  
 sun the lyre glows dark red and strange.*

Oh evening of my lifetime! Symbol of fulfillment  
 My lyre, it has now returned to me  
 I am no longer mute. Even the sunset sings  
 The tired world, once more awake and young  
 It dances now the dance it once taught me. (*Begins to play.*)

Wine  
 Intoxicating, filled with sweetness, drawn from the sun of  
     warm southern slopes  
 Oh wine!  
 You, the wild-raving daughters of Bacchus!  
 Oh, you Bacchantes!

Wild-wanton daughters of worlds now in flames  
 Light all the torches and sing you my name  
 The world is mine!

*Bacchantes enter from all sides. They surround Orpheus and begin with raving dances, pulling the singer with them.*

Oh, you Bacchantes!  
 I welcome you all to a feast for your master,  
 Swing now your skirts! Sing to your god and his warm  
     southern lands,  
 Weave 'round my brow the immortal beguiling, with gods  
     reconciling,  
 Blood-red and shining rose-woven bands!

**BACCHANTES.** With us, Orpheus, your playing, it calls us to you!

**ORPHEUS.** Whirlpools spin faster and plunge to the depths, you  
     who despise a life lived passionless

See me, the one who has overcome all! Me! I will be free!  
 I am free!

**DRYAD.** Free!

**ORPHEUS.** All of the burdens the gods placed upon me,  
     Passion and song and the sheer weight of living  
 I rend them in two with a stroke of the strings!

**BACCHANTES.** With us!

**ORPHEUS.** Melding in me all of nature's creatures, plants and the  
     trees, even stones now are joyful  
     Long kept in shackles, finally awakened, powerful cry.  
 Finally the death-inspired, terrible nightmare of an eternity,  
     over at last!

**DRYAD.** At last!

**ORPHEUS.** Transparent ether!

Trace of the spirits, rent by the storms of fierce-driving stars,  
 You are the victor! Bridged by dreams, cosmic forces' eternal  
     defender

Look how the darkness flees! Life has claimed victory!  
 Oh, you Bacchantes! Everywhere light!

DRYAD. Light!

ORPHEUS. Light have our burdens become!

Dark tongues of flame start to rise! Judgment has come!

BACCHANTES. Light! Mystical trance!

ORPHEUS. Those who triumph, like me, join in the dance!

Mine is the prize! All of my promise is used, all is fulfilled

Raving and wild, dancing shoes winged by flame

All of you, join in the dance!

BACCHANTES. Dance!

ORPHEUS. Faster!

Spin the earth round till it starts to burn, flames leaping  
higher with every turn

Brighter and brighter!

Tear, oh Bacchantes, the clouds from the sky, pale tattered  
shrouds that conceal the gods' death!

Remember the secret, to you I gave! And now, on top of the  
gods' sinking grave

Dance like a fire that consumes all the earth!

BACCHANTES. Tear down the clouds from the sky!

ORPHEUS. Light have our burdens become!

The end of eternity!

Everywhere, light!

Everywhere happiness, gone is all loneliness!

Finally the end is in sight, open the door into light!

Tear all things stable apart, spirit in verse!

BACCHANTES. Tear all things stable apart, oh, his clothes tear to shreds,

Spirit in verse, oh, and the flesh is free,

Tear off the wreath from his brow, the wreath that from

Bacchus he stole,

Oh, break open his skull,

Finally from spirit released,

Feed on his brain!

*Orpheus is thrown to the ground, in the midst of the crowd of the  
raving dancers.*

ORPHEUS. Alas, my death! Fading and falling star!

*The Bacchantes leave him and, dancing in highest ecstasy, quickly vanish. Alkaios and the shepherds arrive. As they see Orpheus lying as if lifeless, they surround him, supporting his head . . .*

ALKAIOS. Orpheus—dying!

OLD SHEPHERD. How could this come to pass  
He's leaving us, who loved us once so well?

ALKAIOS. The poet's love is always a leave-taking  
From all the thousand silent, earthly things  
That echo with his words like shepherds' flutes

FIRST SHEPHERD. The poet's love is always a leave-taking . . .

ALKAIOS. Like birds in autumn, drawn to southern seas  
He heeds the call of vague and distant dreams  
You gather up his early-orphaned verses  
String them together, like a chain of pearls,  
On quiet evenings, pensive and alone,  
You let them slowly glide between your fingers . . .

SECOND SHEPHERD. I am with you, when through the leafless hedges  
The fall wind blows  
And in the fountains' bowls of whitest marble  
The nymph laments . . .

THIRD SHEPHERD. I often kneel at dusk before the deep blue  
Of violets shy, embedded in soft grass  
And wish to be for them a vase so slender  
And sometimes kneel 'til skies glow grey with dawn . . .

FOURTH SHEPHERD. Oh autumn of the earth, oh, deepest stillness,  
The restless darkness of my solitude.  
Whom can I offer these, my tired verses?  
Flute melody, a sound slowly receding,  
Oh autumn of the earth, deep solitude . . .

EURYDICE (*voice*). Where are you, Orpheus? Let me no longer wait  
In vain for the dear touch of my sweet husband!

ORPHEUS (*awakening from his unconsciousness*). And what is love?  
The longing of two shadows  
To seem like something real in the light . . .

EURYDICE (*voice*). Two verses, oh, are we, within a poem of  
dreams . . .

ALKAIOS. You are the song that God sings to himself.

ORPHEUS (*dying*). And tell my mother she should weep no more . . .

*The shepherds lay him softly on the grass. It is very dark. Now  
Alkaios lifts the dead one's harp high, so that they can see it.*

ALKAIOS. Hush, listen, friends, the sound of Orpheus's harp . . .

*The lyre glows and illuminates the scene. While the curtain slowly  
falls, soft muted string music emerges from the lyre.*