
Orpheus' Plea ("Prière d'Orphée")

MARIE-JEANNE DURRY

(Translated by John Fraser)

Master, nocturnal master, master,
King of the darkness, lord of metals,
The scent of the sun and living things
Is flowing in the folds of my cloak!
The dead held in your vice-like grip
Trembling open wide their nostrils.
I am the ocean and the boat,
Motionless dark master of roots!

Master hid in the depths of night,
I now can view your dreaded face.
By what miracle of hope,
Dark star of paralyzing cold,
Up to that throne devoid of being
Where you are reigning have I come?
On the dark marble of your tablets,
I've flashed the light of a bare arm,

What air do you know, you who are breathing
In the close place which the wind shuns?
Do you hear the footsteps of the living?
All is sound and light and motion
On earth where water flows and quivers:
Seated solitary and brooding,
Think of those who dream together.

Do you know the living flesh and fruit
That swell to ripeness in the light?
Your rule is over ruined bodies,
Over phantoms without substance,
Over the silences of stones.

Your fixed eyes underneath your brows
Are slowly lowering their lids:
See, I have brought gifts for you,

Tangy lemons and sweet apples,
A comb of honey, a little bird,
A nest made out of feathers and moss,
The frail tassel of a reed
Softer than the tender muzzle
Of a deer, a fleck of wool,
And the delicate threads of webs
That morning lays upon the fields.

Inhale, touch, taste, look!
Do you know the beauty of the world?
The flowers open in my voice,
You only know the underside
And the dry infertile depths.
Your rule is over what has ended,
Over woods that winter strips.
Yesterday on earth it rained.

Do you hate mortals, king of the dead?
Broad wings glide up there above you,
Heavy, muted, like remorse.
Soundlessly among the shades,
From their gloomy flights you glean
Only emptiness, grief, fear.
Your portal which my voice profanes,
Is kept by apathy and absence.

Here everything is fleeting, hazy,
Or else more permanent than stone:
Gliding vapors, surging waves
Of confused sighs, or massive blocks
Of dense abrasive minerals.
I struck with my fist. Under the impact

Only I trembled. Bowed, I advanced.
Ah, such a thirst to see your face
In the formless night of hell!

Nothing stirs in your memory
When I speak of youth to you,
When I tell the trembling tale
Of hopefulness and promises.
What caresses that I recalled
Could soften your severity?

But silently your fingers knit,
Resting there on your rigid knees.
Alas for the music which has moved
Unmoving mountains, savage wolves.
Alas for the kisses and the taste
Of juices reddening my mouth!
I didn't come as a conqueror!

But all the same, look round you; all
The shapes here in the pathless dark
Are eddying like smoke about me.
They've never drunk the morning dew
Or the blood of sacrifices,
The only watering of their soul
Has been with tears and angry passions.

My fading track is being followed.
All of those beings who are enslaved
By death are suffering and recalling.
No hunger of theirs has been assuaged!
Your bloodless folk belong to me.

They belong to me in the distress
And happiness of former times.
My rhythms aid and give them pain.
Their sightless eyes are turned towards

The entire universe through me.
A human voice is all that's needed
And your bitter host reject
The forgetfulness of your domain.

Forgetfulness? How could I forget
Her who was alive and mine!
Bound by an eternal knot,
Our separate bodies are as one.

The living love. Me, I love you,
Lost and dead woman. I desire you,
You who are gone, and whom I sense
In every fibre of my being.
Let a god ignore my pleas,
I am the slave, he is the master,
But nothing will make disappear
As long as I remain alive
The faith from which you can be reborn!

Alas, your presence is a dream!
You haven't risen from the tomb.
The days begin and end as usual,
And the past vanishes bit by bit.
I am both the torch and flame
Of a dwindling sad cortège.
How lovely was your happy laugh!
But laughing here is sacrilege.

Innumerable fingers touch me.
You are everywhere and nowhere.
What mouths place kisses on my mouth?
What arms are wrapped around my neck?
My eyes stray. I am driven wild.
I think I see you, but it's the void
Which sweeps me onward in its eddies,
Peopled by the greedy phantoms.

From the torments which I endure,
Spare, oh master of the abyss,
She who launched on summer days
Ecstatic songs to the gods of the peaks.
You who weigh man and his crimes,
Place me in the scales, I'm lighter
Than the innocence of victims:
All I can do is love and sing.

Alone, you judge alone in the pit!
But you yourself love somberly.
Source of suffering, you too suffer!
Your silence is like that of a dark
Tower upon which tempests and vultures
Beat in vain under the clouds:
But in your underground abode,
You've known a radiant mirage.

Your own goddess was rapt by you
In a swirl of chariot horses,
In a frenzy of desire.
It was the season of renewal,
She had gone out gathering poppies
And lilies in her springtime robe.

She was tall, erect, and radiant.
Her breath flowed across the land
And reached you in your hideaway.
Her tresses floated in the air,
You surged up from the opened pit,
Your heavy kiss bit into her neck,
You abducted her and raped her,
Grazing on her motionless flesh.

Gripping in your powerful arms
The drooping body of the goddess,

You plunged back into the clayey lair.
How you were enamoured of her,
Priestess of your shadowy stronghold,
The recluse with submissive eyes,
Bowing down before your harshness!
But you had to reign without her.

How can one hold as prisoner
The daughter of the crops and groves,
The adored springtime prophetess
Of all which wakes and trusts in life,
The tender gleaner in the autumn,
Among the late flowers in the fields?
Your captive but also your equal,
You gave her back to the upper air!

It wasn't the outcry of her mother
Which conquered. An untroubled sleeper,
You cherish the dark in your domain!
There's no importance for the sower
Of night and anger and ill-will,
In the suffering of men and gods!

You didn't yield her up to force,
But to desires that you discerned
Beyond the seeming sundering.
At last your soul began to know her
In her paleness and privacy,
The chaste queen, the faithful one,
Who's penetrated deep within you.

Strangers shut off by massive walls
From one another without recourse,
It's seemingly a hopeless struggle,
But suddenly a gap appears
Through which two hearts can be laid bare.
She deciphered your mystery

And, forgiving, understood.
God of dead hearts, you know the worth
Of a goddess with a woman's heart.

But more alone, still, than an outlaw,
Regret parches and famishes you.
What you must sacrifice is your pride.
Sooner her distant task, her joy,
Her royal tread beyond the tomb,
The emptiness lit by her going,
Than her unconsolable scorn.
She is your dream and not your prey.

She unites what you tear apart,
Restores that which you destroy.
She's your redemption and your beacon,
And your memory leads her on.
Inflexible in your domain,
You've granted her a dispensation.
A weightless people follow her.
You finish, she begins.

But faithful all the time to you,
She senses when you want her back.
Willingly, gravely, she descends
Towards him who is deprived of her.
She shines down there among the dead!

She is to you more than herself!
Oh give me back now my own good!
Or else take me. No blasphemy
Will issue from me. I belong,
This poor sad man, this nobody,
To nothingness, to dust and ashes,
But let my shade have the support
Of the shade that used to be my light.

Mingled in infinity
Let our essences be as one!
Under the heavens I am banished
From happiness. I bay at the moon.
I roam and scent. I importune
The land and sea with my complaints.
Monarch of losses and misfortune,
That which I love you've taken from me!

Astonish us! Let me be in her
As she in me, the same for ever.
But woe if, like a too stern father,
Your power to which I yield myself
Establishes her among the dead!
Free, oh free into upper air,
In their tenderness and peace,
Two beings chosen by your mercy!

Each on the other intent, mingling
Our looks, voices, minds, hearing
Upon the threshold of slow night
The murmuring of swaying branches.
The spouse becomes a fiancée,
The old love is still young and strong,
Old unhappinesses are healed,
Two mortals have attained their haven.

I see my dream, I almost touch it,
Restore it, Lord of destiny!!
Surging up from the lower depths,
Return to me the morning star!
Consent and I'll obtain through you
The being I love above all others.
So near and yet alas so far!
As she was, let her be reborn!

A moment of human happiness,
A moment earthly, tangible!
You only need to open your hand.
Allow a life to escape your maze!
Let me see the invisible,
Seize that which escapes and flees me,
You are the arrow, I the target,
Your eyes frighten me in the night.

Allow us our whole destiny,
To live together, know together
The love and enduring comradeship
That intermingle and entwine.
Let us in the course of the years
Grow old together and, assenting,
One day before you reappear
Together in death. Watch, wait,

The world passes and you remain.
We are shallow and evanescent.
Towards you all the hours are heading,
They strike upon your reefs and sink.
Massive and unchangeable,
You are the inevitable end.
You seize hold of death and life,
O god, tamer of the untameable!

You know it, everything ends in you,
No need for cunning and deception,
We'll come back down under your roof,
Joined in the confusion of death!
Be careful, though, if you refuse me!
Time knows how to hollow out
The powers that the gods abuse:
The gods themselves can also die!