



## Orphic Elegy

*Luke Fischer*

### Prefatory Note

“Orphic Elegy” is a five-part poetic sequence addressed to Orpheus, which contemplates the history and disintegration of a holistic vision of the universe. It first reimagines the Orphism of antiquity (parts I and II), proceeds to consider the Renaissance (part III), addresses the atrocities of the twentieth century (part IV), and concludes with an expansion of Orphic myth in connection with the event of mass extinction that is currently taking place. Parts II and V are reproduced here. The complete poem opens Luke Fischer’s new poetry collection *A Gamble for my Daughter* (2022), which can be ordered from Vagabond Press: <https://vagabondpress.net/collections/forthcoming/products/luke-fischer-a-gamble-for-my-daughter>

### II

If this is so  
why could your music, your voice  
not penetrate and turn  
the heart of the Maenads?  
Were they harder  
than the heart of stones  
which your song deflected  
as they shuttled towards you,  
flung from the Maenads’ hands?

Were they more crazed than hyenas  
with bloody teeth rallying  
around the corpse of a gazelle,

in numbers threatening  
even to lions, ripping the succulent flesh  
to the bone? Even these  
your song was able to reach, reveal  
the woven music in muscle and sinew,  
equally in hyena and gazelle. The shrieking  
carnivores suddenly grew mute when in the brief  
pauses of their syncopated cackles  
they caught the crystal ring of your strings  
like a gleam of Helios in a stream's  
twisting ripples. Though they didn't join  
the animal circle, the zodiacal wreath around  
the stone on which, seated upright, you played,  
they bowed their heads and in single file  
left the bleeding body.

If this is so,  
why could your music  
not turn the Maenads' hearts,  
teach them temperance,  
if not forgiveness and love?  
Did you let this be? Was it your will?

A stone struck your head  
another your shoulder, your gut,  
the lyre tumbled, cracked.  
They took your body, tore it  
to pieces which were scattered  
across lands, and felt no remorse.  
Only your severed head remained intact—  
floating across the sea, in dismemberment and death

still resounding, intoning a hymn.  
Accompanied by circling dolphins and seals,  
it washed onto a shore of Lesbos.

V

No-one expected  
you would rise again  
nor how or where  
if it came to pass.  
In abyssal night  
you were woken by a cry,  
a cry resounding  
through underworld caverns.  
It wasn't the cry of Eurydice  
as viper fangs punctured her calf,  
nor the cry of Pythagoras  
condemned to Limbo for eternity,  
nor the anguish of an infant  
trapped in darkness. Not  
of any human voice, the cry  
of an animal, the last of its kind,  
shook you with a cymbal's clamour  
from the chasms of sleep, shattered  
your core into a million shards  
like sunlight on the coruscating sea.

The dying roar  
of the last monk seal  
crescendoed as it crossed  
into the realm of shades. More

than an individual's despair, this cry  
attested the death of a species, the end  
of possibility of incarnation. As into a whirlpool,  
into a black hole, the seal was retracted  
into its idea, became a cousin  
of the unicorn, a dream that would never again  
wake in a supple body. And beyond the fate  
of the Caribbean seal, it contained—in gong-like reverberations—  
thousands upon thousands of tones and overtones,  
each with its own coloured timbre.

With your ear attuned to the subtlest vibration  
you divined spectres of vanished animals: a howling  
Honshu wolf, a black-striped thylacine, a white-speckled river dolphin,  
a hook-billed dodo, ridged lyre-horns of a Pyrenean ibex,  
an ochre-breasted passenger pigeon, a pointy-nosed  
pig-footed bandicoot, the long face and rack of a Caucasian elk,  
a great auk standing upright on a stone, ink-marked wings  
of a Madeiran butterfly matching a daisy,  
black and white tattoos of a Caspian tiger  
slinking between trunks of a phantom forest ...  
And the cry ever expanded  
as Orpheus listened—wholly exposed—  
to the cacophony of pain, irreparable loss.

Meanwhile a tree arose on your left side—  
arose from the underworld's sterile, grey soil—  
and branched into a lyre with tightly-strung tendrils.  
As you plucked them, they sent forth sounds  
clearer than the pure-tongued syllables of rocky springs  
and modulated the chaos: the metallic clash and thunderous  
echoes subdued into tones of flute and violin,

adjusted to the lyre's tonic, arranged themselves  
into patterns, bright chords, constellations,  
remembered rhythms of breath, pulse and walk,  
gestation and flight. And as planets weave  
colours through the circle of animals,  
join them in a mobile text, you wove  
a dream in song: *Gathered together  
in the kingdom of the dead, we sing in service  
to the source of life. Once my voice paved a path—  
each word a stepping-stone—downwards from the world  
and across the river of forgetting, but now with all of you  
who cannot return to the sun's abode or gather  
under a canopy's dome, my voice seeks a path to the ears  
of the living, to touch their hearts as once it found entrance  
to the cold heart of Hades. We sing with the hope that humans  
may hear, may find in the roar of the dying seal, the fire  
of this song, the fire of determination to end the devastation,  
a future harmony of all elements and beings,  
the double choir of the living and the dead, remembering each other  
in antiphon from both sides of the river.*