

## Eurydice

**Paul Mariani**

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### Eurydice

A winter's tale. I was teaching up at Hunter,  
a night class, nineteen sixty-six or seven.  
Mostly stenographers and clerks, with nine-  
to-five jobs somewhere in Manhattan  
or the boroughs. Introduction to Poetry & Prose,  
the one oh one variety.

That evening it was  
Thomas Hardy. Hap, The Darkling Thrush,  
The Convergence of the Twain, the appointed  
iceberg peeling the skin off the Titanic  
like some sardine can. Bleak and heady stuff  
for a bleak and heady time. Nam, napalm,  
race riots, Agent Orange, the whole shebang.

And I was on that night, my best imitation  
orphic voice, rhapsodizing on Blind Necessity  
and Fate, the marriage of a massive ship—state  
of the art—with some far more massive iceberg.  
Hardy's Hope seemed a hollow thing in the face  
of so much suffering, as I suppose he wanted it  
to pale for the poem he was writing.

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No one to blame:  
no grand design, no God or gods, no anything  
but a rolling of blind dice. I preened myself.  
After all, I was twenty-six, and understood  
the mossy myths, dark and cold, that have told us  
since before the Greeks how the world really works.

And then the time was up and the students  
gathered up their things and headed out.  
I was packing my books and the papers  
I would have to grade back in our small  
apartment out in Flushing, where I lived  
with my wife and two small sons, trying  
to finish my degree against the odds.

It was late,  
past ten, and the wind blowing down the cold  
corridors of New York. I meant to head straight  
for the subway round the corner to begin  
the long ride home on the IRT which, along  
with other huddled masses, would take me there.

I looked up to see a woman standing by my desk,  
Neither young nor old, one of my students,  
as nameless as the rest. She seemed shaken  
and her face was pale. You're a good man,  
she was saying. Tell me you don't believe  
the things you said tonight. Tell me you believe  
there is a God.

Understand, this was outré and  
unprofessional on her part, almost comic, except  
she looked as if I'd robbed her. And for what  
it matters, I did subscribe to something like a creed.  
Or thought I did. But we were talking Poetry here,  
and this was New York City, not some Podunkville.  
I assured her my own beliefs had nothing  
to do with it. These were Hardy's gifts to us,  
the poems, written out of a world he had suffered.

True, he wasn't everyone's cup of tea—a brilliant use of language, I warmed myself by thinking—and the skeptic's view was something she might sip on, a way of adding to the available stock of reality we are heir to.

I turned towards the elevator and bowed goodnight, then walked quickly down the long cold corridors and past the guard out on to Lexington, then down into the subway, repeating Hardy's lines about how the Immanent Will that stirs and urges everything / Prepared a sinister mate/ For her. The place was almost empty at that hour, and I already at the turnstile when I saw her following at a distance, her lips moving with the cold.

I'm hard of hearing, and the train was already entering the station, so I tried to read her lips. Please, her eyes were saying above the racket of the place, You're a good man. Tell me you believe. Eurydice, I thought, drowning in a hell of her own making, pallid and accusing, and I some unwitting Orpheus. For Christ's sake (this to myself . . . and then to her) I do believe. O.K? I do. I do, even if just then I felt nothing but annoyance, and to tell the truth, a touch of icy terror. Please, go home, it's late. Everything's O.K.

A gesture only, comforting someone who needed to be comforted. She smiled weakly, a nervous smile, as if she'd just avoided a collision with something looming out there, immense and cold, and backed upstairs to greet the vast and open void as the doors closed after me.

What in hell had I just done? I thought, hanging from a strap, the weary, deadened faces all about me. What was this, some operatic scene by Gluck?

How badly had I just compromised myself,  
I wondered, then turned to catch two amber lights  
and a skull dangling from a strap across the aisle,  
as the train went hurling down the sullen rails, lugging  
each of us, as it happens, to our appointed destination.