

Classic Poetry Series

Rainer Maria Rilke

- poems -

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A Walk

My eyes already touch the sunny hill.
going far ahead of the road I have begun.
So we are grasped by what we cannot grasp;
it has inner light, even from a distance-

and charges us, even if we do not reach it,
into something else, which, hardly sensing it,
we already are; a gesture waves us on
answering our own wave...
but what we feel is the wind in our faces.

Translated by Robert Bly

Rainer Maria Rilke

Abishag

I

She lay, and serving-men her lithe arms took,
And bound them round the withering old man,
And on him through the long sweet hours she lay,
And little fearful of his many years.

And many times she turned amidst his beard
Her face, as often as the night-owl screeched,
And all that was the night around them reached
Its feelers manifold of longing fears.

As they had been the sisters of the child
The stars trembled, and fragrance searched the room,
The curtain stirring sounded with a sign
Which drew her gentle glances after it.

But she clung close upon the dim old man,
And, by the night of nights not over-taken,
Upon the cooling of the King she lay
Maidenly, and lightly as a soul.

II

The King sate thinking out the empty day
Of deeds accomplished and untasted joys,
And of his favorite bitch that he had bred
But with the evening Abishag was arched
Above him. His disheveled life lay bare,
Abandoned as diffamed coasts, beneath
The quiet constellation of her breasts.

But many times, as one in women skilled,
he through his eyebrows recognized the mouth
Unmoved, unknissed; and saw: the comet green
Of her desired reached not to where he lay.
He shivered. And he listened like a hound,
And sought himself in his remaining blood.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Adam

Marveling he stands on the cathedral's
steep ascent, close to the rose window,
as though frightened at the apotheosis
which grew and all at once

set him down over these and these.
And straight he stands and glad of his endurance,
simply determined; as the husbandman
who began and who knew not how

from the garden of Eden finished-full
to find a way out into
the new earth. God was hard to persuade;

and threatened him, instead of acceding,
ever and again, that he would die.
Yet man persisted: she will bring forth.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Again and Again

Again and again, however we know the landscape of love
and the little churchyard there, with its sorrowing names,
and the frighteningly silent abyss into which the others
fall: again and again the two of us walk out together
under the ancient trees, lie down again and again
among the flowers, face to face with the sky.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Again And Again, However We Know The Landscape Of Love

Again and again, however we know the landscape of love
and the little churchyard there, with its sorrowing names,
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Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Rainer Maria Rilke

Along the Sun-Drenched Roadside

Along the sun-drenched roadside, from the great
hollow half-treetrunk, which for generations
has been a trough, renewing in itself
an inch or two of rain, I satisfy
my thirst: taking the water's pristine coolness
into my whole body through my wrists.
Drinking would be too powerful, too clear;
but this unhurried gesture of restraint
fills my whole consciousness with shining water.

Thus, if you came, I could be satisfied
to let my hand rest lightly, for a moment,
lightly, upon your shoulder or your breast.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Archaic Torso of Apollo

We cannot know his legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,

gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:

would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

Rainer Maria Rilke

As Once the Winged Energy of Delight

As once the winged energy of delight
carried you over childhood's dark abysses,
now beyond your own life build the great
arch of unimagined bridges.

Wonders happen if we can succeed
in passing through the harshest danger;
but only in a bright and purely granted
achievement can we realize the wonder.

To work with Things in the indescribable
relationship is not too hard for us;
the pattern grows more intricate and subtle,
and being swept along is not enough.

Take your practiced powers and stretch them out
until they span the chasm between two
contradictions...For the god
wants to know himself in you.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Autumn

The leaves are falling, falling as if from far up,
as if orchards were dying high in space.
Each leaf falls as if it were motioning "no."

And tonight the heavy earth is falling
away from all other stars in the loneliness.

We're all falling. This hand here is falling.
And look at the other one. It's in them all.

And yet there is Someone, whose hands
infinitely calm, holding up all this falling.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Autumn Day

Lord: it is time. The summer was immense.
Lay your shadow on the sundials
and let loose the wind in the fields.

Bid the last fruits to be full;
give them another two more southerly days,
press them to ripeness, and chase
the last sweetness into the heavy wine.

Whoever has no house now will not build one
anymore.
Whoever is alone now will remain so for a long
time,
will stay up, read, write long letters,
and wander the avenues, up and down,
restlessly, while the leaves are blowing.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Before Summer Rain

Suddenly, from all the green around you,
something-you don't know what-has disappeared;
you feel it creeping closer to the window,
in total silence. From the nearby wood

you hear the urgent whistling of a plover,
reminding you of someone's Saint Jerome:
so much solitude and passion come
from that one voice, whose fierce request the downpour

will grant. The walls, with their ancient portraits, glide
away from us, cautiously, as though
they weren't supposed to hear what we are saying.

And reflected on the faded tapestries now;
the chill, uncertain sunlight of those long
childhood hours when you were so afraid.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Black Cat

A ghost, though invisible, still is like a place
your sight can knock on, echoing; but here
within this thick black pelt, your strongest gaze
will be absorbed and utterly disappear:

just as a raving madman, when nothing else
can ease him, charges into his dark night
howling, pounds on the padded wall, and feels
the rage being taken in and pacified.

She seems to hide all looks that have ever fallen
into her, so that, like an audience,
she can look them over, menacing and sullen,
and curl to sleep with them. But all at once

as if awakened, she turns her face to yours;
and with a shock, you see yourself, tiny,
inside the golden amber of her eyeballs
suspended, like a prehistoric fly.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Blank Joy

She who did not come, wasn't she determined
nonetheless to organize and decorate my heart?
If we had to exist to become the one we love,
what would the heart have to create?

Lovely joy left blank, perhaps you are
the center of all my labors and my loves.
If I've wept for you so much, it's because
I preferred you among so many outlined joys.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Buddha in Glory

Center of all centers, core of cores,
almond self-enclosed, and growing sweet--
all this universe, to the furthest stars
all beyond them, is your flesh, your fruit.

Now you feel how nothing clings to you;
your vast shell reaches into endless space,
and there the rich, thick fluids rise and flow.
Illuminated in your infinite peace,

a billion stars go spinning through the night,
blazing high above your head.
But in you is the presence that
will be, when all the stars are dead.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Child in Red

Sometimes she walks through the village in her
little red dress
all absorbed in restraining herself,
and yet, despite herself, she seems to move
according to the rhythm of her life to come.

She runs a bit, hesitates, stops,
half-turns around...
and, all while dreaming, shakes her head
for or against.

Then she dances a few steps
that she invents and forgets,
no doubt finding out that life
moves on too fast.

It's not so much that she steps out
of the small body enclosing her,
but that all she carries in herself
frolics and ferments.

It's this dress that she'll remember
later in a sweet surrender;
when her whole life is full of risks,
the little red dress will always seem right.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Childhood

It would be good to give much thought, before
you try to find words for something so lost,
for those long childhood afternoons you knew
that vanished so completely -and why?

We're still reminded-: sometimes by a rain,
but we can no longer say what it means;
life was never again so filled with meeting,
with reunion and with passing on

as back then, when nothing happened to us
except what happens to things and creatures:
we lived their world as something human,
and became filled to the brim with figures.

And became as lonely as a sheperd
and as overburdened by vast distances,
and summoned and stirred as from far away,
and slowly, like a long new thread,
introduced into that picture-sequence
where now having to go on bewilders us.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Death

Come thou, thou last one, whom I recognize,
unbearable pain throughout this body's fabric:
as I in my spirit burned, see, I now burn in thee:
the wood that long resisted the advancing flames
which thou kept flaring, I now am nourishing
and burn in thee.

My gentle and mild being through thy ruthless fury
has turned into a raging hell that is not from here.
Quite pure, quite free of future planning, I mounted
the tangled funeral pyre built for my suffering,
so sure of nothing more to buy for future needs,
while in my heart the stored reserves kept silent.

Is it still I, who there past all recognition burn?
Memories I do not seize and bring inside.
O life! O living! O to be outside!
And I in flames. And no one here who knows me.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Dedication

I have great faith in all things not yet spoken.
I want my deepest pious feelings freed.
What no one yet has dared to risk and warrant
will be for me a challenge I must meet.

If this presumptuous seems, God, may I be forgiven.
For what I want to say to you is this:
my efforts shall be like a driving force,
quite without anger, without timidity
as little children show their love for you.

With these outflowing, river-like, with deltas
that spread like arms to reach the open sea,
with the recurrent tides that never cease
will I acknowledge you, will I proclaim you
as no one ever has before.

And if this should be arrogance, so let me
arrogant be to justify my prayer
that stands so serious and so alone
before your forehead, circled by the clouds.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Dedication to M.

Swing of the heart. O firmly hung, fastened on what
invisible branch. Who, who gave you the push,
that you swung with me into the leaves?
How near I was to the exquisite fruits. But not-staying
is the essence of this motion. Only the nearness, only
toward the forever-too-high, all at once the possible
nearness. Vicinities, then
from an irresistibly swung-up-to place
-already, once again, lost-the new sight, the outlook.
And now: the commanded return
back and across and into equilibrium's arms.
Below, in between, hesitation, the pull of earth, the passage
through the turning-point of the heavy-, past it: and the
catapult stretches,
weighted with the heart's curiosity,
to the other side, opposite, upward.
Again how different, how new! How they envy each other
at the ends of the rope, these opposite halves of pleasure.

Or, shall I dare it: these quarters?-And include, since it
withholds itself,
that other half-circle, the one whose impetus pushes the
swing?
I'm not just imagining it, as the mirror of my here-and-now
arc. Guess nothing. It will be
newer someday. But from endpoint to endpoint
of the arc that I have most dared, I already fully possess it:
overflowings from me plunge over to it and fill it,
stretch it apart, almost. And my own parting,
when the force that pushes me someday
stops, makes it all the more near.

Rainer Maria Rilke

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And now: the commanded return
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through the turning-point of the heavy--, past it: and the
catapult stretches,
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Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Rainer Maria Rilke

Duino Elegies: The First Elegy

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels' hierarchies? and even if one of them suddenly pressed me against his heart, I would perish in the embrace of his stronger existence. For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror which we are barely able to endure and are awed because it serenely disdains to annihilate us. Each single angel is terrifying. And so I force myself, swallow and hold back the surging call of my dark sobbing. Oh, to whom can we turn for help? Not angels, not humans; and even the knowing animals are aware that we feel little secure and at home in our interpreted world. There remains perhaps some tree on a hillside daily for us to see; yesterday's street remains for us stayed, moved in with us and showed no signs of leaving. Oh, and the night, the night, when the wind full of cosmic space invades our frightened faces. Whom would it not remain for -that longed-after, gently disenchanting night, painfully there for the solitary heart to achieve? Is it easier for lovers? Don't you know yet? Fling out of your arms the emptiness into the spaces we breath -perhaps the birds will feel the expanded air in their more fervent flight.

Yes, the springtime were in need of you. Often a star waited for you to espy it and sense its light. A wave rolled toward you out of the distant past, or as you walked below an open window, a violin gave itself to your hearing. All this was trust. But could you manage it? Were you not always distraught by expectation, as if all this were announcing the arrival of a beloved? (Where would you find a place to hide her, with all your great strange thoughts coming and going and often staying for the night.) When longing overcomes you, sing of women in love; for their famous passion is far from immortal enough. Those whom you almost envy, the abandoned and desolate ones, whom you found so much more loving than those gratified. Begin ever new again the praise you cannot attain; remember: the hero lives on and survives; even his downfall was for him only a pretext for achieving his final birth. But nature, exhausted, takes lovers back into itself, as if such creative forces could never be achieved a second time. Have you thought of Gaspara Stampa sufficiently:

that any girl abandoned by her lover may feel from that far intenser example of loving:

"Ah, might I become like her!" Should not their oldest sufferings finally become more fruitful for us? Is it not time that lovingly we freed ourselves from the beloved and, quivering, endured: as the arrow endures the bow-string's tension, and in this tense release becomes more than itself. For staying is nowhere.

Voices, voices. Listen my heart, as only saints have listened: until the gigantic call lifted them clear off the ground. Yet they went on, impossibly, kneeling, completely unawares: so intense was their listening. Not that you could endure the voice of God -far from it! But listen to the voice of the wind and the ceaseless message that forms itself out of silence. They sweep toward you now from those who died young. Whenever they entered a church in Rome or Naples, did not their fate quietly speak to you as recently as the tablet did in Santa Maria Formosa? What do they want of me? to quietly remove the appearance of suffered injustice that, at times, hinders a little their spirits from freely proceeding onward.

Of course, it is strange to inhabit the earth no longer, to no longer use skills one had barely time to acquire; not to observe roses and other things that promised so much in terms of a human future, no longer to be what one was in infinitely anxious hands; to even discard one's own name as easily as a child abandons a broken toy. Strange, not to desire to continue wishing one's wishes. Strange to notice all that was related, fluttering so loosely in space. And being dead is hard work and full of retrieving before one can gradually feel a trace of eternity. -Yes, but the living make the mistake of drawing too sharp a distinction. Angels (they say) are often unable to distinguish between moving among the living or the dead. The eternal torrent whirls all ages along with it, through both realms forever, and their voices are lost in its thunderous roar.

In the end the early departed have no longer need of us. One is gently weaned from things of this world as a child outgrows the need of its mother's breast. But we who have need of those great mysteries, we for whom grief is so often the source of spiritual growth, could we exist without them? Is the legend vain that tells of music's beginning

in the midst of the mourning for Linos?
the daring first sounds of song piercing
the barren numbness, and how in that stunned space
an almost godlike youth suddenly left forever,
and the emptiness felt for the first time
those harmonious vibrations which now enrapture
and comfort and help us.

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

Duino Elegies: The Fourth Elegy

O trees of life, oh, what when winter comes?
We are not of one mind. Are not like birds
in unison migrating. And overtaken,
overdue, we thrust ourselves into the wind
and fall to earth into indifferent ponds.
Blossoming and withering we comprehend as one.
And somewhere lions roam, quite unaware,
in their magnificence, of any weakness.

But we, while wholly concentrating on one thing,
already feel the pressure of another.
Hatred is our first response. And lovers,
are they not forever invading one another's
boundaries? -although they promised space,
hunting and homeland. Then, for a sketch
drawn at a moment's impulse, a ground of contrast
is prepared, painfully, so that we may see.
For they are most exact with us. We do not know
the contours of our feelings. We only know
what shapes them from the outside.

Who has not sat, afraid, before his own heart's
curtain? It lifted and displayed the scenery
of departure. Easy to understand. The well-known
garden swaying just a little. Then came the dancer.
Not he! Enough! However lightly he pretends to move:
he is just disguised, costumed, an ordinary man
who enters through the kitchen when coming home.
I will not have these half-filled human masks;
better the puppet. It at least is full.
I will endure this well-stuffed doll, the wire,
the face that is nothing but appearance. Here out front
I wait. Even if the lights go down and I am told:
"There's nothing more to come," -even if
the grayish drafts of emptiness come drifting down
from the deserted stage -even if not one
of my now silent forebears sits beside me
any longer, not a woman, not even a boy-
he with the brown and squinting eyes-:
I'll still remain. For one can always watch.

Am I not right? You, to whom life would taste
so bitter, Father, after you - for my sake -
slipped of mine, that first muddy infusion
of my necessity. You kept on tasting, Father,
as I kept on growing, troubled by the aftertaste
of my so strange a future as you kept searching
my unfocused gaze -you who, so often since
you died, have been afraid for my well-being,
within my deepest hope, relinquishing that calmness,
the realms of equanimity such as the dead possess
for my so small fate -Am I not right?

And you, my parents, am I not right? You who loved me
for that small beginning of my love for you
from which I always shyly turned away, because
the distance in your features grew, changed,
even while I loved it, into cosmic space
where you no longer were...: and when I feel
inclined to wait before the puppet stage, no,
rather to stare at it so intensely that in the end
to counter-balance my searching gaze, an angel
has to come as an actor, and begin manipulating
the lifeless bodies of the puppets to perform.
Angel and puppet! Now at last there is a play!
Then what we separate can come together by our
very presence. And only then the entire cycle
of our own life-seasons is revealed and set in motion.
Above, beyond us, the angel plays. Look:
must not the dying notice how unreal, how full
of pretense is all that we accomplish here, where
nothing is to be itself. O hours of childhood,
when behind each shape more than the past lay hidden,
when that which lay before us was not the future.

We grew, of course, and sometimes were impatient
in growing up, half for the sake of pleasing those
with nothing left but their own grown-upness.
Yet, when alone, we entertained ourselves
with what alone endures, we would stand there
in the infinite space that spans the world and toys,
upon a place, which from the first beginning
had been prepared to serve a pure event.

Who shows a child just as it stands? Who places him
within his constellation, with the measuring-rod
of distance in his hand. Who makes his death
from gray bread that grows hard, -or leaves
it there inside his rounded mouth, jagged as the core
of a sweet apple?.....The minds of murderers
are easily comprehended. But this: to contain death,
the whole of death, even before life has begun,
to hold it all so gently within oneself,
and not be angry: that is indescribable.

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

Duino Elegies: The Tenth Elegy

That some day, emerging at last from the terrifying vision
I may burst into jubilant praise to assenting angels!
That of the clear-struck keys of the heart not one may fail
to sound because of a loose, doubtful or broken string!
That my streaming countenance may make me more resplendent
That my humble weeping change into blossoms.
Oh, how will you then, nights of suffering, be remembered
with love. Why did I not kneel more fervently, disconsolate
sisters, more bendingly kneel to receive you, more loosely
surrender myself to your loosened hair? We, squanderers of
gazing beyond them to judge the end of their duration.
They are only our winter's foliage, our sombre evergreen,
one of the seasons of our interior year, -not only season,
but place, settlement, camp, soil and dwelling.

How woeful, strange, are the alleys of the City of Pain,
where in the false silence created from too much noise,
a thing cast out from the mold of emptiness
swaggers that gilded hubbub, the bursting memorial.
Oh, how completely an angel would stamp out their market
of solace, bounded by the church, bought ready for use:
as clean, disappointing and closed as a post office on Sunday.
Farther out, though, there are always the rippling edges
of the fair. Seasaws of freedom! High-divers and jugglers of zeal!
And the shooting-gallery's targets of bedizened happiness:
targets tumbling in tinny contortions whenever some better
marksman happens to hit one. From cheers to chance he goes
staggering on, as booths that can please the most curious tastes
are drumming and bawling. For adults only there is something
special to see: how money multiplies. Anatomy made amusing!
Money's organs on view! Nothing concealed! Instructive,
and guaranteed to increase fertility!...

Oh, and then outside,
behind the farthest billboard, pasted with posters for 'Deathless,'
that bitter beer tasting quite sweet to drinkers,
if they chew fresh diversions with it..
Behind the billboard, just in back of it, life is real.
Children play, and lovers hold each other, -aside,
earnestly, in the trampled grass, and dogs respond to nature.
The youth continues onward; perhaps he is in love with
a young Lament....he follows her into the meadows.
She says: the way is long. We live out there....

Where? And the youth
follows. He is touched by her gentle bearing. The shoulders,
the neck, -perhaps she is of noble ancestry?
Yet he leaves her, turns around, looks back and waves...
What could come of it? She is a Lament.

Only those who died young, in their first state of
timeless serenity, while they are being weaned,
follow her lovingly. She waits for girls

and befriends them. Gently she shows them
what she is wearing. Pearls of grief
and the fine-spun veils of patience.-
With youths she walks in silence.

But there, where they live, in the valley,
an elderly Lament responds to the youth as he asks:-
We were once, she says, a great race, we Laments.
Our fathers worked the mines up there in the mountains;
sometimes among men you will find a piece of polished
primeval pain, or a petrified slag from an ancient volcano.
Yes, that came from there. Once we were rich.-

And she leads him gently through the vast landscape
of Lamentation, shows him the columns of temples,
the ruins of strongholds from which long ago
the princes of Lament wisely governed the country.
Shows him the tall trees of tears,
the fields of flowering sadness,
(the living know them only as softest foliage);
show him the beasts of mourning, grazing-
and sometimes a startled bird, flying straight through
their field of vision, far away traces the image of its
solitary cry.-

At evening she leads him to the graves of elders
of the race of Lamentation, the sybils and prophets.
With night approaching, they move more softly,
and soon there looms ahead, bathed in moonlight,
the sepulcher, that all-guarding ancient stone,
Twin-brother to that on the Nile, the lofty Sphinx-:
the silent chamber's countenance.
They marvel at the regal head that has, forever silent,
laid the features of manking upon the scales of the stars.
His sight, still blinded by his early death,
cannot grasp it. But the Sphinx's gaze
frightens an owl from the rim of the double-crown.
The bird, with slow down-strokes, brushes
along the cheek, that with the roundest curve,
and faintly inscribes on the new death-born hearing,
as though on the double page of an opened book,
the indescribable outline.

And higher up, the stars. New ones. Stars
of the land of pain. Slowly she names them:
"There, look: the Rider ,the Staff,and that
crowded constellation they call the the Garland of Fruit.
Then farther up toward the Pole:
Cradle, Way, the Burning Book, Doll, Window.
And in the Southern sky, pure as lines
on the palm of a blessed hand, the clear sparkling M,
standing for Mothers....."

Yet the dead youth must go on alone.
In silence the elder Lament brings him
as far as the gorge where it shimmers in the moonlight:
The Fountainhead of Joy. With reverence she names it,
saying: "In the world of mankind it is a life-bearing stream."

They reach the foothills of the mountain,
and there she embraces him, weeping.

Alone, he climbs the mountains of primeval pain.
Not even his footsteps ring from this soundless fate.

But were these timeless dead to awaken an image for us,
see, they might be pointing to the catkins, hanging
from the leafless hazels, or else they might mean
the rain that falls upon the dark earth in early Spring.

And we, who always think
of happiness as rising feel the emotion
that almost overwhelms us
whenever a happy thing falls.

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

Early Spring

Harshness vanished. A sudden softness
has replaced the meadows' wintry grey.
Little rivulets of water changed
their singing accents. Tendernesses,

hesitantly, reach toward the earth
from space, and country lanes are showing
these unexpected subtle risings
that find expression in the empty trees.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Elegy I

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels'
hierarchies? and even if one of them suddenly
pressed me against his heart, I would perish
in the embrace of his stronger existence.
For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror
which we are barely able to endure and are awed
because it serenely disdains to annihilate us.
Each single angel is terrifying.
And so I force myself, swallow and hold back
the surging call of my dark sobbing.
Oh, to whom can we turn for help?
Not angels, not humans;
and even the knowing animals are aware that we feel
little secure and at home in our interpreted world.
There remains perhaps some tree on a hillside
daily for us to see; yesterday's street remains for us
stayed, moved in with us and showed no signs of leaving.
Oh, and the night, the night, when the wind
full of cosmic space invades our frightened faces.
Whom would it not remain for -that longed-after,
gently disenchanting night, painfully there for the
solitary heart to achieve? Is it easier for lovers?
Don't you know yet ? Fling out of your arms the
emptiness into the spaces we breath -perhaps the birds
will feel the expanded air in their more fervent flight.

Yes, the springtime were in need of you. Often a star
waited for you to espy it and sense its light.
A wave rolled toward you out of the distant past,
or as you walked below an open window,
a violin gave itself to your hearing.
All this was trust. But could you manage it?
Were you not always distraught by expectation,
as if all this were announcing the arrival
of a beloved? (Where would you find a place
to hide her, with all your great strange thoughts
coming and going and often staying for the night.)
When longing overcomes you, sing of women in love;
for their famous passion is far from immortal enough.
Those whom you almost envy, the abandoned and
desolate ones, whom you found so much more loving
than those gratified. Begin ever new again
the praise you cannot attain; remember:
the hero lives on and survives; even his downfall
was for him only a pretext for achieving
his final birth. But nature, exhausted, takes lovers
back into itself, as if such creative forces could never be
achieved a second time.
Have you thought of Gaspara Stampa sufficiently:

that any girl abandoned by her lover may feel
from that far intenser example of loving:

"Ah, might I become like her!" Should not their oldest sufferings finally become more fruitful for us? Is it not time that lovingly we freed ourselves from the beloved and, quivering, endured: as the arrow endures the bow-string's tension, and in this tense release becomes more than itself. For staying is nowhere.

Voices, voices. Listen my heart, as only saints have listened: until the gigantic call lifted them clear off the ground. Yet they went on, impossibly, kneeling, completely unawares: so intense was their listening. Not that you could endure the voice of God -far from it! But listen to the voice of the wind and the ceaseless message that forms itself out of silence. They sweep toward you now from those who died young. Whenever they entered a church in Rome or Naples, did not their fate quietly speak to you as recently as the tablet did in Santa Maria Formosa? What do they want of me? to quietly remove the appearance of suffered injustice that, at times, hinders a little their spirits from freely proceeding onward.

Of course, it is strange to inhabit the earth no longer, to no longer use skills one had barely time to acquire; not to observe roses and other things that promised so much in terms of a human future, no longer to be what one was in infinitely anxious hands; to even discard one's own name as easily as a child abandons a broken toy. Strange, not to desire to continue wishing one's wishes. Strange to notice all that was related, fluttering so loosely in space. And being dead is hard work and full of retrieving before one can gradually feel a trace of eternity. -Yes, but the living make the mistake of drawing too sharp a distinction. Angels (they say) are often unable to distinguish between moving among the living or the dead. The eternal torrent whirls all ages along with it, through both realms forever, and their voices are lost in its thunderous roar.

In the end the early departed have no longer need of us. One is gently weaned from things of this world as a child outgrows the need of its mother's breast. But we who have need of those great mysteries, we for whom grief is so often the source of spiritual growth, could we exist without them? Is the legend vain that tells of music's beginning

in the midst of the mourning for Linos?
the daring first sounds of song piercing
the barren numbness, and how in that stunned space
an almost godlike youth suddenly left forever,
and the emptiness felt for the first time
those harmonious vibrations which now enrapture
and comfort and help us.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Elegy IV

O trees of life, oh, what when winter comes?
We are not of one mind. Are not like birds
in unison migrating. And overtaken,
overdue, we thrust ourselves into the wind
and fall to earth into indifferent ponds.
Blossoming and withering we comprehend as one.
And somewhere lions roam, quite unaware,
in their magnificence, of any weakness.

But we, while wholly concentrating on one thing,
already feel the pressure of another.
Hatred is our first response. And lovers,
are they not forever invading one another's
boundaries? -although they promised space,
hunting and homeland. Then, for a sketch
drawn at a moment's impulse, a ground of contrast
is prepared, painfully, so that we may see.
For they are most exact with us. We do not know
the contours of our feelings. We only know
what shapes them from the outside.

Who has not sat, afraid, before his own heart's
curtain? It lifted and displayed the scenery
of departure. Easy to understand. The well-known
garden swaying just a little. Then came the dancer.
Not he! Enough! However lightly he pretends to move:
he is just disguised, costumed, an ordinary man
who enters through the kitchen when coming home.
I will not have these half-filled human masks;
better the puppet. It at least is full.
I will endure this well-stuffed doll, the wire,
the face that is nothing but appearance. Here out front
I wait. Even if the lights go down and I am told:
"There's nothing more to come," -even if
the grayish drafts of emptiness come drifting down
from the deserted stage -even if not one
of my now silent forebears sits beside me
any longer, not a woman, not even a boy-
he with the brown and squinting eyes-:
I'll still remain. For one can always watch.

Am I not right? You, to whom life would taste
so bitter, Father, after you - for my sake -
slipped of mine, that first muddy infusion
of my necessity. You kept on tasting, Father,
as I kept on growing, troubled by the aftertaste
of my so strange a future as you kept searching
my unfocused gaze -you who, so often since
you died, have been afraid for my well-being,
within my deepest hope, relinquishing that calmness,
the realms of equanimity such as the dead possess
for my so small fate -Am I not right?

And you, my parents, am I not right? You who loved me
for that small beginning of my love for you
from which I always shyly turned away, because
the distance in your features grew, changed,
even while I loved it, into cosmic space
where you no longer were...: and when I feel
inclined to wait before the puppet stage, no,
rather to stare at it so intensely that in the end
to counter-balance my searching gaze, an angel
has to come as an actor, and begin manipulating
the lifeless bodies of the puppets to perform.
Angel and puppet! Now at last there is a play!
Then what we separate can come together by our
very presence. And only then the entire cycle
of our own life-seasons is revealed and set in motion.
Above, beyond us, the angel plays. Look:
must not the dying notice how unreal, how full
of pretense is all that we accomplish here, where
nothing is to be itself. O hours of childhood,
when behind each shape more than the past lay hidden,
when that which lay before us was not the future.

We grew, of course, and sometimes were impatient
in growing up, half for the sake of pleasing those
with nothing left but their own grown-upness.
Yet, when alone, we entertained ourselves
with what alone endures, we would stand there
in the infinite space that spans the world and toys,
upon a place, which from the first beginning
had been prepared to serve a pure event.

Who shows a child just as it stands? Who places him
within his constellation, with the measuring-rod
of distance in his hand. Who makes his death
from gray bread that grows hard, -or leaves
it there inside his rounded mouth, jagged as the core
of a sweet apple?.....The minds of murderers
are easily comprehended. But this: to contain death,
the whole of death, even before life has begun,
to hold it all so gently within oneself,
and not be angry: that is indescribable.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Elegy X

That some day, emerging at last from the terrifying vision
I may burst into jubilant praise to assenting angels!
That of the clear-struck keys of the heart not one may fail
to sound because of a loose, doubtful or broken string!
That my streaming countenance may make me more resplendent
That my humble weeping change into blossoms.
Oh, how will you then, nights of suffering, be remembered
with love. Why did I not kneel more fervently, disconsolate
sisters, more bendingly kneel to receive you, more loosely
surrender myself to your loosened hair? We, squanderers of
gazing beyond them to judge the end of their duration.
They are only our winter's foliage, our sombre evergreen,
one of the seasons of our interior year, -not only season,
but place, settlement, camp, soil and dwelling.

How woeful, strange, are the alleys of the City of Pain,
where in the false silence created from too much noise,
a thing cast out from the mold of emptiness
swaggers that gilded hubbub, the bursting memorial.
Oh, how completely an angel would stamp out their market
of solace, bounded by the church, bought ready for use:
as clean, disappointing and closed as a post office on Sunday.
Farther out, though, there are always the rippling edges
of the fair. Seasaws of freedom! High-divers and jugglers of zeal!
And the shooting-gallery's targets of bedizened happiness:
targets tumbling in tinny contortions whenever some better
marksman happens to hit one. From cheers to chance he goes
staggering on, as booths that can please the most curious tastes
are drumming and bawling. For adults only there is something
special to see: how money multiplies. Anatomy made amusing!
Money's organs on view! Nothing concealed! Instructive,
and guaranteed to increase fertility!...

Oh, and then outside,
behind the farthest billboard, pasted with posters for 'Deathless,'
that bitter beer tasting quite sweet to drinkers,
if they chew fresh diversions with it..
Behind the billboard, just in back of it, life is real.
Children play, and lovers hold each other, -aside,
earnestly, in the trampled grass, and dogs respond to nature.
The youth continues onward; perhaps he is in love with
a young Lament....he follows her into the meadows.
She says: the way is long. We live out there....
Where? And the youth
follows. He is touched by her gentle bearing. The shoulders,
the neck, -perhaps she is of noble ancestry?
Yet he leaves her, turns around, looks back and waves...
What could come of it? She is a Lament.

Only those who died young, in their first state of
timeless serenity, while they are being weaned,
follow her lovingly. She waits for girls

and befriends them. Gently she shows them
what she is wearing. Pearls of grief
and the fine-spun veils of patience.-
With youths she walks in silence.

But there, where they live, in the valley,
an elderly Lament responds to the youth as he asks:-
We were once, she says, a great race, we Laments.
Our fathers worked the mines up there in the mountains;
sometimes among men you will find a piece of polished
primeval pain, or a petrified slag from an ancient volcano.
Yes, that came from there. Once we were rich.-

And she leads him gently through the vast landscape
of Lamentation, shows him the columns of temples,
the ruins of strongholds from which long ago
the princes of Lament wisely governed the country.
Shows him the tall trees of tears,
the fields of flowering sadness,
(the living know them only as softest foliage);
show him the beasts of mourning, grazing-
and sometimes a startled bird, flying straight through
their field of vision, far away traces the image of its
solitary cry.-

At evening she leads him to the graves of elders
of the race of Lamentation, the sybils and prophets.
With night approaching, they move more softly,
and soon there looms ahead, bathed in moonlight,
the sepulcher, that all-guarding ancient stone,
Twin-brother to that on the Nile, the lofty Sphinx-:
the silent chamber's countenance.
They marvel at the regal head that has, forever silent,
laid the features of manking upon the scales of the stars.
His sight, still blinded by his early death,
cannot grasp it. But the Sphinx's gaze
frightens an owl from the rim of the double-crown.
The bird, with slow down-strokes, brushes
along the cheek, that with the roundest curve,
and faintly inscribes on the new death-born hearing,
as though on the double page of an opened book,
the indescribable outline.

And higher up, the stars. New ones. Stars
of the land of pain. Slowly she names them:
"There, look: the Rider ,the Staff,and that
crowded constellation they call the the Garland of Fruit.
Then farther up toward the Pole:
Cradle, Way, the Burning Book, Doll, Window.
And in the Southern sky, pure as lines
on the palm of a blessed hand, the clear sparkling M,
standing for Mothers....."

Yet the dead youth must go on alone.
In silence the elder Lament brings him
as far as the gorge where it shimmers in the moonlight:
The Fountainhead of Joy. With reverence she names it,
saying: "In the world of mankind it is a life-bearing stream."

They reach the foothills of the mountain,
and there she embraces him, weeping.

Alone, he climbs the mountains of primeval pain.
Not even his footsteps ring from this soundless fate.

But were these timeless dead to awaken an image for us,
see, they might be pointing to the catkins, hanging
from the leafless hazels, or else they might mean
the rain that falls upon the dark earth in early Spring.

And we, who always think
of happiness as rising feel the emotion
that almost overwhelms us
whenever a happy thing falls.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Encounter In The Chestnut Avenue

He felt the entrance's green darkness
wrapped coolly round him like a silken cloak
that he was still accepting and arranging;
when at the opposite transparent end, far off,

through green sunlight, as through green window panes,
whitely a solitary shape
flared up, long remaining distant
and then finally, the downdriving light
boiling over it at every step,

bearing on itself a bright pulsation,
which in the blond ran shyly to the back.
But suddenly the shade was deep,
and nearby eyes lay gazing

from a clear new unselfconscious face,
which, as in a portrait, lived intensely
in the instant things split off again:
first there forever, and then not at all.

Translated by Edward Snow

Rainer Maria Rilke

Eve

Simply she stands at the cathedral's
great ascent, close to the rose window,
with the apple in the apple-pose,
guiltless-guilty once and for all

of the growing she gave birth to
since from the circle of eternities
loving she went forth, top struggle through
her way throughout the earth like a young year.

Ah, gladly yet a little in that land
Would she have lingered, heeding the harmony
And understanding of the animals.

But since she found the man determined,
She went with him, aspiring after death,
And she had as yet hardly known God.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Evening

The sky puts on the darkening blue coat
held for it by a row of ancient trees;
you watch: and the lands grow distant in your sight,
one journeying to heaven, one that falls;

and leave you, not at home in either one,
not quite so still and dark as the darkened houses,
not calling to eternity with the passion of what becomes
a star each night, and rises;

and leave you (inexpressibly to unravel)
your life, with its immensity and fear,
so that, now bounded, now immeasurable,
it is alternately stone in you and star.

Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Submitted by zenfishsticks

Rainer Maria Rilke

Evening Love Song

Ornamental clouds
compose an evening love song;
a road leaves evasively.
The new moon begins

a new chapter of our nights,
of those frail nights
we stretch out and which mingle
with these black horizontals.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Exposed on the cliffs of the heart

Exposed on the cliffs of the heart. Look, how tiny down there,
look: the last village of words and, higher,
(but how tiny) still one last
farmhouse of feeling. Can you see it?
Exposed on the cliffs of the heart. Stoneground
under your hands. Even here, though,
something can bloom; on a silent cliff-edge
an unknowing plant blooms, singing, into the air.
But the one who knows? Ah, he began to know
and is quiet now, exposed on the cliffs of the heart.
While, with their full awareness,
many sure-footed mountain animals pass
or linger. And the great sheltered birds flies, slowly
circling, around the peak's pure denial. - But
without a shelter, here on the cliffs of the heart...

Rainer Maria Rilke

Extinguish Thou My Eyes

Extinguish Thou my eyes:I still can see Thee,
deprive my ears of sound:I still can hear Thee,
and without feet I still can come to Thee,
and without voice I still can call to Thee.

Sever my arms from me, I still will hold Thee
with all my heart as with a single hand,
arrest my heart, my brain will keep on beating,
and Should Thy fire at last my brain consume,
the flowing of my blood will carry Thee.

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

Fall Day

Lord, it is time. This was a very big summer.
Lay your shadows over the sundial,
and let the winds loose on the fields.

Command the last fruits to be full;
give them two more sunny days,
urge them on to fulfillment and throw
the last sweetness into the heavy wine.

Who has no house now, will never build one.
Whoever is alone now, will long remain so,
Will watch, read, write long letters
and will wander in the streets, here and there
restlessly, when the leaves blow.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Falling Stars

Do you remember still the falling stars
that like swift horses through the heavens raced
and suddenly leaped across the hurdles
of our wishes--do you recall? And we
did make so many! For there were countless numbers
of stars: each time we looked above we were
astounded by the swiftness of their daring play,
while in our hearts we felt safe and secure
watching these brilliant bodies disintegrate,
knowing somehow we had survived their fall.

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

Fear of the Inexplicable

But fear of the inexplicable has not alone impoverished the existence of the individual; the relationship between one human being and another has also been cramped by it, as though it had been lifted out of the riverbed of endless possibilities and set down in a fallow spot on the bank, to which nothing happens. For it is not inertia alone that is responsible for human relationships repeating themselves from case to case, indescribably monotonous and unrenewed: it is shyness before any sort of new, unforeseeable experience with which one does not think oneself able to cope.

But only someone who is ready for everything, who excludes nothing, not even the most enigmatical, will live the relation to another as something alive and will himself draw exhaustively from his own existence. For if we think of this existence of the individual as a larger or smaller room, it appears evident that most people learn to know only a corner of their room, a place by the window, a strip of floor on which they walk up and down. Thus they have a certain security. And yet that dangerous insecurity is so much more human which drives the prisoners in Poe's stories to feel out the shapes of their horrible dungeons and not be strangers to the unspeakable terror of their abode.

We, however, are not prisoners. No traps or snares are set about us, and there is nothing which should intimidate or worry us. We are set down in life as in the element to which we best correspond, and over and above this we have through thousands of years of accommodation become so like this life, that when we hold still we are, through a happy mimicry, scarcely to be distinguished from all that surrounds us. We have no reason to mistrust our world, for it is not against us. Has it terrors, they are our terrors; has it abysses, those abuses belong to us; are dangers at hand, we must try to love them. And if only we arrange our life according to that principle which counsels us that we must always hold to the difficult, then that which now still seems to us the most alien will become what we most trust and find most faithful. How should we be able to forget those ancient myths about dragons that at the last moment turn into princesses; perhaps all the dragons of our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave. Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Fire's Reflection

Perhaps it's no more than the fire's reflection
on some piece of gleaming furniture
that the child remembers so much later
like a revelation.

And if in his later life, one day
wounds him like so many others,
it's because he mistook some risk
or other for a promise.

Let's not forget the music, either,
that soon had hauled him
toward absence complicated
by an overflowing heart....

Translated by A. Poulin

Rainer Maria Rilke

For Hans Carossa

Losing too is still ours; and even forgetting
still has a shape in the kingdom of transformation.
When something's let go of, it circles; and though we are
rarely the center
of the circle, it draws around us its unbroken, marvelous
curve.

Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Rainer Maria Rilke

from The Tenth Elegy

Ah, but the City of Pain: how strange its streets are:
the false silence of sound drowning sound,
and there--proud, brazen, effluence from the mold of emptiness--
the gilded hubbub, the bursting monument.
How an Angel would stamp out their market of solaces,
set up alongside their church bought to order:
clean and closed and woeful as a post office on Sunday.
Outside, though, there's always the billowing edge of the fair.
Swings of Freedom! High-divers and Jugglers of Zeal!
And the shooting gallery with its figures of idiot Happiness
which jump, quiver, and fall with a tinny ring
whenever some better marksman scores. Onward he lurches from cheers
to chance; for booths courting each curious taste
are drumming and barking. And then--for adults only--
a special show: how money breeds, its anatomy, not some charade:
money's genitals, everything, the whole act
from beginning to end--educational and guaranteed to make you
virile
. . . . Oh, but just beyond that,
behind the last of the billboards, plastered with signs for "Deathless,"
that bitter beer which tastes sweet to those drinking it
as long as they have fresh distractions to chew . . . ,
just beyond those boards, just on the other side: things are real.
Children play, lovers hold each other, off in the shadows,
pensive, on the meager grass, while dogs obey nature.
The youth is drawn farther on; perhaps he's fallen in love
with a young Lament He pursues her, enters meadowland.
She says:
"It's a long way. We live out there"
Where? And the youth follows.
Something in her bearing stirs him. Her shoulders, neck--,
perhaps she's of noble descent. Still, he leaves her, turns around,
glances back, waves . . . What's the use? She's a Lament.

Translated by Edward Snow

Rainer Maria Rilke

Girl in Love

That's my window. This minute
So gently did I alight
From sleep--was still floating in it.
Where has my life its limit
And where begins the night?

I could fancy all things around me
Were nothing but I as yet;
Like a crystal's depth, profoundly
Mute, translucent, unlit.

I have space to spare inside me
For the stars, too: so full of room
Feels my heart; so lightly
Would it let go of him, whom

For all I know I have started
To love, it may be to hold.
Strange, as if never charted,
Stares my fortune untold.

Why is it I am bedded
Beneath this infinitude,
Fragrant like a meadow,
Hither and thither moved,

Calling out, yet fearing
Someone might hear the cry,
Destined to disappearing
Within another I.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Girl's Lament

In the years when we were
all children, this inclining
to be alone so much was gentle;
others' time passed fighting,
and one had one's faction,
one's near, one's far-off place,
a path, an animal, a picture.

And I still imagined, that life
would always keep providing
for one to dwell on things within,
Am I within myself not in what's greatest?
Shall what's mine no longer soothe
and understand me as a child?

Suddenly I'm as if cast out,
and this solitude surrounds me
as something vast and unbounded,
when my feeling, standing on the hills
of my breasts, cries out for wings
or for an end.

Translated by Edward Snow

Rainer Maria Rilke

Going Blind

She sat just like the others at the table.
But on second glance, she seemed to hold her cup
a little differently as she picked it up.
She smiled once. It was almost painful.

And when they finished and it was time to stand
and slowly, as chance selected them, they left
and moved through many rooms (they talked and laughed),
I saw her. She was moving far behind

the others, absorbed, like someone who will soon
have to sing before a large assembly;
upon her eyes, which were radiant with joy,
light played as on the surface of a pool.

She followed slowly, taking a long time,
as though there were some obstacle in the way;
and yet: as though, once it was overcome,
she would be beyond all walking, and would fly.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Greek Love-Talk

What I have already learned as a lover,
I see you, beloved, learning angrily;
then for you it distantly departed,
now your destiny stands in all the stars.

Over your breasts we will together contend:
since as glowingly shining they've ripened,
so also your hands desire to touch them
and their own pleasure superintend.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Growing Old

In some summers there is so much fruit,
the peasants decide not to reap any more.
Not having reaped you, oh my days,
my nights, have I let the slow flames
of your lovely produce fall into ashes?

My nights, my days, you have borne so much!
All your branches have retained the gesture
of that long labor you are rising from:
my days, my nights. Oh my rustic friends!

I look for what was so good for you.
Oh my lovely, half-dead trees,
could some equal sweetness still
stroke your leaves, open your calyx?

Ah, no more fruit! But one last time
bloom in fruitless blossoming
without planning, without reckoning,
as useless as the powers of millenia.

Translated by A. Poulin

Rainer Maria Rilke

Heartbeat

Only mouths are we. Who sings the distant heart
which safely exists in the center of all things?
His giant heartbeat is diverted in us
into little pulses. And his giant grief
is, like his giant jubilation, far too
great for us. And so we tear ourselves away
from him time after time, remaining only
mouths. But unexpectedly and secretly
the giant heartbeat enters our being,
so that we scream ----,
and are transformed in being and in countenance.

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

I Am Much Too Alone in This World, Yet Not Alone

I am much too alone in this world, yet not alone
enough
to truly consecrate the hour.
I am much too small in this world, yet not small
enough
to be to you just object and thing,
dark and smart.
I want my free will and want it accompanying
the path which leads to action;
and want during times that beg questions,
where something is up,
to be among those in the know,
or else be alone.

I want to mirror your image to its fullest perfection,
never be blind or too old
to uphold your weighty wavering reflection.
I want to unfold.
Nowhere I wish to stay crooked, bent;
for there I would be dishonest, untrue.
I want my conscience to be
true before you;
want to describe myself like a picture I observed
for a long time, one close up,
like a new word I learned and embraced,
like the everyday jug,
like my mother's face,
like a ship that carried me along
through the deadliest storm.

Rainer Maria Rilke

I Am, O Anxious One

I am, O Anxious One. Don't you hear my voice
surging forth with all my earthly feelings?
They yearn so high, that they have sprouted wings
and whitely fly in circles round your face.
My soul, dressed in silence, rises up
and stands alone before you: can't you see?
don't you know that my prayer is growing ripe
upon your vision as upon a tree?
If you are the dreamer, I am what you dream.
But when you want to wake, I am your wish,
and I grow strong with all magnificence
and turn myself into a star's vast silence
above the strange and distant city, Time.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Ignorant Before the Heavens of My Life

Ignorant before the heavens of my life,
I stand and gaze in wonder. Oh the vastness
of the stars. Their rising and descent. How still.
As if I didn't exist. Do I have any
share in this? Have I somehow dispensed with
their pure effect? Does my blood's ebb and flow
change with their changes? Let me put aside
every desire, every relationship
except this one, so that my heart grows used to
its farthest spaces. Better that it live
fully aware, in the terror of its stars, than
as if protected, soothed by what is near.

Rainer Maria Rilke

In The Beginning

Ever since those wondrous days of Creation
our Lord God sleeps: we are His sleep.
And He accepted this in His indulgence,
resigned to rest among the distant stars.

Our actions stopped Him from reacting,
for His fist-tight hand is numbed by sleep,
and the times brought in the age of heroes
during which our dark hearts plundered Him.

Sometimes He appears as if tormented,
and His body jerks as if plagued by pain;
but these spells are always outweighed by the
number of His countless other worlds.

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

Interior Portrait

You don't survive in me
because of memories;
nor are you mine because
of a lovely longing's strength.

What does make you present
is the ardent detour
that a slow tenderness
traces in my blood.

I do not need
to see you appear;
being born sufficed for me
to lose you a little less.

Translated by A. Poulin

Rainer Maria Rilke

Lady At A Mirror

As in sleeping-drink spices
softly she loosens in the liquid-clear
mirror her fatigued demeanor;
and she puts her smile deep inside.

And she waits while the liquid
rises from it; then she pours her hair
into the mirror, and, lifting one
wondrous shoulder from the evening gown,

she drinks quietly from her image. She drinks
what a lover would drink feeling dazed,
searching it, full of mistrust; and she only

beckons to her maid when at the bottom
of her mirror she finds candles, wardrobes,
and the cloudy dregs of a late hour.

Translated by Edward Snow

Rainer Maria Rilke

Lady On A Balcony

Suddenly she steps, wrapped into the wind,
brightly into brightness, as if singled out,
while now the room as though cut to fit
behind her fills the door

darkly like the ground of cameo,
that lets a glimmer through at the edges;
and you think the evening wasn't there
before she stepped out, and on the railing

set forth just a little of herself,
just her hands, --to be completely light:
as if passed on by the rows of houses
to the heavens, to be swayed by everything.

Translated by Edward Snow

Rainer Maria Rilke

Lament

Everything is far
and long gone by.
I think that the star
glittering above me
has been dead for a million years.
I think there were tears
in the car I heard pass
and something terrible was said.
A clock has stopped striking in the house
across the road...
When did it start?...
I would like to step out of my heart
and go walking beneath the enormous sky.
I would like to pray.
And surely of all the stars that perished
long ago,
one still exists.
I think that I know
which one it is--
which one, at the end of its beam in the sky,
stands like a white city...

Rainer Maria Rilke

Lament (O how all things are far removed)

O how all things are far removed
and long have passed away.
I do believe the star,
whose light my face reflects,
is dead and has been so
for many thousand years.

I had a vision of a passing boat
and heard some voices saying disquieting things.
I heard a clock strike in some distant house...
but in which house?...

I long to quiet my anxious heart
and stand beneath the sky's immensity.
I long to pray...
And one of all the stars
must still exist.
I do believe that I would know
which one alone
endured,
and which like a white city stands
at the ray's end shining in the heavens.

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

Lament (Whom will you cry to, heart?)

Whom will you cry to, heart? More and more lonely,
your path struggles on through incomprehensible
mankind. All the more futile perhaps
for keeping to its direction,
keeping on toward the future,
toward what has been lost.

Once. You lamented? What was it? A fallen berry
of jubilation, unripe.
But now the whole tree of my jubilation
is breaking, in the storm it is breaking, my slow
tree of joy.
Loveliest in my invisible
landscape, you that made me more known
to the invisible angels.

Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Rainer Maria Rilke

Little Tear-Vase

Other vessels hold wine, other vessels hold oil
inside the hollowed-out vault circumscribed by their clay.
I, as smaller measure, and as the slimmest of all,
humbly hollow myself so that just a few tears can fill me.

Wine becomes richer, oil becomes clear, in its vessel.
What happens with tears?-They made me blind in my
glass,
made me heavy and made my curve iridescent,
made me brittle, and left me empty at last.

Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Rainer Maria Rilke

Loneliness

Being apart and lonely is like rain.
It climbs toward evening from the ocean plains;
from flat places, rolling and remote, it climbs
to heaven, which is its old abode.
And only when leaving heaven drops upon the city.

It rains down on us in those twittering
hours when the streets turn their faces to the dawn,
and when two bodies who have found nothing,
dissatisfied and depressed, roll over;
and when two people who despise each other
have to sleep together in one bed-

that is when loneliness receives the rivers...

Rainer Maria Rilke

Love Song

How can I keep my soul in me, so that
it doesn't touch your soul? How can I raise
it high enough, past you, to other things?
I would like to shelter it, among remote
lost objects, in some dark and silent place
that doesn't resonate when your depths resound.
Yet everything that touches us, me and you,
takes us together like a violin's bow,
which draws *one* voice out of two separate strings.
Upon what instrument are we two spanned?
And what musician holds us in his hand?
Oh sweetest song.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Moving Forward

The deep parts of my life pour onward,
as if the river shores were opening out.
It seems that things are more like me now,
That I can see farther into paintings.
I feel closer to what language can't reach.
With my senses, as with birds, I climb
into the windy heaven, out of the oak,
in the ponds broken off from the sky
my falling sinks, as if standing on fishes.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Music

Take me by the hand;
it's so easy for you, Angel,
for you are the road
even while being immobile.

You see, I'm scared no one
here will look for me again;
I couldn't make use of
whatever was given,

so they abandoned me.
At first the solitude
charmed me like a prelude,
but so much music wounded me.

Translated by A. Poulin

Rainer Maria Rilke

Narcissus

Encircled by her arms as by a shell,
she hears her being murmur,
while forever he endures
the outrage of his too pure image...

Wistfully following their example,
nature re-enters herself;
contemplating its own sap, the flower
becomes too soft, and the boulder hardens...

It's the return of all desire that enters
toward all life embracing itself from afar...
Where does it fall? Under the dwindling
surface, does it hope to renew a center?

Rainer Maria Rilke

Night (O you whose countenance)

Night. O you whose countenance, dissolved
in deepness, hovers above my face.
You who are the heaviest counterweight
to my astounding contemplation.

Night, that trembles as reflected in my eyes,
but in itself strong;
inexhaustible creation, dominant,
enduring beyond the earth's endurance;

Night, full of newly created stars that leave
trails of fire streaming from their seams
as they soar in inaudible adventure
through interstellar space:

how, overshadowed by your all-embracing vastness,
I appear minute!---
Yet, being one with the ever more darkening earth,
I dare to be in you.

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

Night (This night, agitated by the growing storm)

This night, agitated by the growing storm,
how it has suddenly expanded its dimensions--,
that ordinarily would have gone unnoticed,
like a cloth folded, and hidden in the folds of time.

Where the stars give resistance it does not stop there,
neither does it begin within the forest's depths,
nor show upon the surface of my face
nor with your appearance.

The lamps keep swaying, fully unaware:
is our light lying?
Is night the only reality
that has endured through thousands of years?

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

On Hearing Of A Death

We lack all knowledge of this parting. Death
does not deal with us. We have no reason
to show death admiration, love or hate;
his mask of feigned tragic lament gives us

a false impression. The world's stage is still
filled with roles which we play. While we worry
that our performances may not please,
death also performs, although to no applause.

But as you left us, there broke upon this stage
a glimpse of reality, shown through the slight
opening through which you dissapeared: green,
evergreen, bathed in sunlight, actual woods.

We keep on playiing, still anxious, our difficult roles
declaiming, accompanied by matching gestures
as required. But your presence so suddenly
removed from our midst and from our play, at times

overcomes us like a sense of that other
reality: yours, that we are so overwhelmed
and play our actual lives instead of the performance,
forgetting altogehter the applause.

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

Palm

Interior of the hand. Sole that has come to walk
only on feelings. That faces upward
and in its mirror
receives heavenly roads, which travel
along themselves.
That has learned to walk upon water
when it scoops,
that walks upon wells,
transfiguring every path.
That steps into other hands,
changes those that are like it
into a landscape:
wanders and arrives within them,
fills them with arrival.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Parting

How I have felt that thing that's called 'to part',
and feel it still: a dark, invincible,
cruel something by which what was joined so well
is once more shown, held out, and torn apart.

In what defenceless gaze at that I've stood,
which, as it, calling to me, let me go,
stayed there, as though it were all womanhood,
yet small and white and nothing more than, oh,

waving, now already unrelated
to me, a sight, continuing wave,--scarce now
explainable: perhaps a plum-tree bough
some perching cuckoo's hastily vacated.

Translated by J.B. Leishman

Rainer Maria Rilke

Piano Practice

The summer hums. The afternoon fatigues;
she breathed her crisp white dress distractedly
and put into it that sharply etched etude
her impatience for a reality

that could come: tomorrow, this evening--,
that perhaps was there, was just kept hidden;
and at the window, tall and having everything,
she suddenly could feel the pampered park.

With that she broke off; gazed outside, locked
her hands together; wished for a long book--
and in a burst of anger shoved back
the jasmine scent. She found it sickened her.

Translated by Edward Snow

Rainer Maria Rilke

Portrait of my Father as a Young Man

In the eyes: dream. The brow as if it could feel
something far off. Around the lips, a great
freshness--seductive, though there is no smile.
Under the rows of ornamental braid
on the slim Imperial officer's uniform:
the saber's basket-hilt. Both hands stay
folded upon it, going nowhere, calm
and now almost invisible, as if they
were the first to grasp the distance and dissolve.
And all the rest so curtained within itself,
so cloudy, that I cannot understand
this figure as it fades into the background--.

Oh quickly disappearing photograph
in my more slowly disappearing hand.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Put Out My Eyes

Put out my eyes, and I can see you still,
Slam my ears to, and I can hear you yet;
And without any feet can go to you;
And tongueless, I can conjure you at will.
Break off my arms, I shall take hold of you
And grasp you with my heart as with a hand;
Arrest my heart, my brain will beat as true;
And if you set this brain of mine afire,
Then on my blood-stream I yet will carry you.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Rememberance

And you wait, keep waiting for that one thing
which would infinitely enrich your life:
the powerful, uniquely uncommon,
the awakening of dormant stones,
depths that would reveal you to yourself.

In the dusk you notice the book shelves
with their volumes in gold and in brown;
and you think of far lands you journeyed,
of pictures and of shimmering gowns
worn by women you conquered and lost.

And it comes to you all of a sudden:
That was it! And you arise, for you are
aware of a year in your distant past
with its fears and events and prayers.

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

Sacrifice

How my body blooms from every vein
more fragrantly, since you appeared to me;
look, I walk slimmer now and straighter,
and all you do is wait-:who are you then?

Look: I feel how I'm moving away,
how I'm shedding my old life, leaf by leaf.
Only your smile spreads like sheer stars
over you and, soon now, over me.

Whatever shines through my childhood years
still nameless and gleaming like water,
I will name after you at the altar,
which is blazing brightly from your hair
and braided gently with your breasts.

Translated by Edward Snow

Rainer Maria Rilke

Self-Portrait

The steadfastness of generations of nobility
shows in the curving lines that form the eyebrows.
And the blue eyes still show traces of childhood fears
and of humility here and there, not of a servant's,
yet of one who serves obediently, and of a woman.
The mouth formed as a mouth, large and accurate,
not given to long phrases, but to express
persuasively what is right. The forehead without guile
and favoring the shadows of quiet downward gazing.

This, as a coherent whole, only casually observed;
never as yet tried in suffering or succeeding,
held together for an enduring fulfillment,
yet so as if for times to come, out of these scattered things,
something serious and lasting were being planned.

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

Sense Of Something Coming

I am like a flag in the center of open space.
I sense ahead the wind which is coming, and must live
it through.
while the things of the world still do not move:
the doors still close softly, and the chimneys are full
of silence,
the windows do not rattle yet, and the dust still lies down.

I already know the storm, and I am troubled as the sea.
I leap out, and fall back,
and throw myself out, and am absolutely alone
in the great storm.

Translated by Robert Bly

Rainer Maria Rilke

Slumber Song

Some day, if I should ever lose you,
will you be able then to go to sleep
without me softly whispering above you
like night air stirring in the linden tree?

Without my waking here and watching
and saying words as tender as eyelids
that come to rest weightlessly upon your breast,
upon your sleeping limbs, upon your lips?

Without my touching you and leaving you
alone with what is yours, like a summer garden
that is overflowing with masses
of melissa and star-anise?

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

Solemn Hour

Whoever now weeps somewhere in the world,
weeps without reason in the world,
weeps over me.

Whoever now laughs somewhere in the night,
laughs without reason in the night,
laughs at me.

Whoever now wanders somewhere in the world,
wanders without reason out in the world,
wanders toward me.

Whoever now dies somewhere in the world,
dies without reason in the world,
looks at me.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Song

(From the diaries of Malte Laurids Brigge)

You, whom I do not tell that all night long
I lie weeping,
whose very being makes me feel wanting
like a cradle.

You, who do not tell me, that you lie awake
thinking of me:--
what, if we carried all these longings within us
without ever being overwhelmed by them,
letting them pass?

Look at these lovers, tormented by love,
when first they begin confessing,
how soon they lie!

You make me feel alone. I try imagining:
one moment it is you, then it's the soaring wind;
a fragrance comes and goes but never lasts.
Oh, within my arms I lost all whom I loved!
Only you remain, always reborn again.
For since I never held you, I hold you fast.

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

Song Of The Orphan

I am no one and never will be anyone,
for I am far too small to claim to be;
not even later.

Mothers and Fathers,
take pity on me.

I fear it will not pay to raise me:
I shall fall victim to the mower's scythe.
No one can find me useful now: I am too young,
and tomorrow will be too late.

I only have one dress,
worn thin and faded,
but it will last an eternity
even before God, perhaps.

I only have this wispy hair
(that always remained the same)
yet once was someone's dearest love.

Now he has nothing that he loves.

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

Song Of The Sea

(Capri, Piccola Marina)

Timeless sea breezes,
sea-wind of the night:
you come for no one;
if someone should wake,
he must be prepared
how to survive you.

Timeless sea breezes,
that for aeons have
blown ancient rocks,
you are purest space
coming from afar...

Oh, how a fruit-bearing
fig tree feels your coming
high up in the moonlight.

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

Spanish Dancer

As in one's hand a lighted match blinds you before
it comes aflame and sends out brilliant flickering
tongues to every side -- so, within the ring of the
spectators, her dance begins in hasty, heated rhythms
and spreads itself darting flames around.

And suddenly the dance is altogether flame!

With a fierce glance she sets her hair alight.
Unexpectedly she turns with daring artfulness
the swirling flounces of her dress within this
conflagration, out of which her upheld naked arms,
clapping the castanets, appear like serpents striking.

And then, afraid her fire were diminishing,
she gathers it all up and flings it down
with an imperious haughty gesture, and watches
as it lies there writhing on the ground, unyielding
and unwilling to concede the dance has ended.
Yet she show victory in her sweet swift smile
as she lifts up her face, while with her small firm feet
she stamps out the last of the dying embers.

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

Sunset

Slowly the west reaches for clothes of new colors
which it passes to a row of ancient trees.
You look, and soon these two worlds both leave you
one part climbs toward heaven, one sinks to earth.

leaving you, not really belonging to either,
not so hopelessly dark as that house that is silent,
not so unswervingly given to the eternal as that thing
that turns to a star each night and climbs-

leaving you (it is impossible to untangle the threads)
your own life, timid and standing high and growing,
so that, sometimes blocked in, sometimes reaching out,
one moment your life is a stone in you, and the next, a star.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Telling You All

Telling you all would take too long.
Besides, we read in the Bible
how the good is harmful
and how misfortune is good.

Let's invite something new
by unifying our silences;
if, then and there, we advance,
we'll know it soon enough.

And yet towards evening,
when his memory is persistent,
one belated curiosity
stops him before the mirror.

We don't know if he is frightened.
But he stays, he is engrossed,
and, facing his reflection,
transports himself somewhere else.

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Apple Orchard

Come let us watch the sun go down
and walk in twilight through the orchard's green.
Does it not seem as if we had for long
collected, saved and harbored within us
old memories? To find releases and seek
new hopes, remembering half-forgotten joys,
mingled with darkness coming from within,
as we randomly voice our thoughts aloud
wandering beneath these harvest-laden trees
reminiscent of Durer woodcuts, branches
which, bent under the fully ripened fruit,
wait patiently, trying to outlast, to
serve another season's hundred days of toil,
straining, uncomplaining, by not breaking
but succeeding, even though the burden
should at times seem almost past endurance.
Not to falter! Not to be found wanting!

Thus must it be, when willingly you strive
throughout a long and uncomplaining life,
committed to one goal: to give yourself!
And silently to grow and to bear fruit.

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Blindman's Song

I am blind, you outsiders. It is a curse,
a contradiction, a tiresome farce,
and every day I despair.

I put my hand on the arm of my wife
(colorless hand on colorless sleeve)
and she walks me through empty air.

You push and shove and think that you've been
sounding different from stone against stone,
but you are mistaken: I alone
live and suffer and howl.

In me there is an endless outcry
and I can't tell what's crying, whether its my
broken heart or my bowels.

Are the tunes familiar? You don't sing them like this:
how could you understand?

Each morning the sunlight comes into your house,
and you welcome it as a friend.
And you know what it's like to see face-to-face;
and that tempts you to be kind.

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Future

The future: time's excuse
to frighten us; too vast
a project, too large a morsel
for the heart's mouth.

Future, who won't wait for you?
Everyone is going there.
It suffices you to deepen
the absence that we are.

Translated by A. Poulin

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Grown-Up

All this stood upon her and was the world
and stood upon her with all its fear and grace
as trees stand, growing straight up, imageless
yet wholly image, like the Ark of God,
and solemn, as if imposed upon a race.

As she endured it all: bore up under
the swift-as-flight, the fleeting, the far-gone,
the inconceivably vast, the still-to-learn,
serenely as a woman carrying water
moves with a full jug. Till in the midst of play,
transfiguring and preparing for the future,
the first white veil descended, gliding softly

over her opened face, almost opaque there,
never to be lifted off again, and somehow
giving to all her questions just one answer:
In you, who were a child once-in you.

Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Last Evening

And night and distant rumbling; now the army's
carrier-train was moving out, to war.
He looked up from the harpsichord, and as
he went on playing, he looked across at her

almost as one might gaze into a mirror:
so deeply was her every feature filled
with his young features, which bore his pain and were
more beautiful and seductive with each sound.

Then, suddenly, the image broke apart.
She stood, as though distracted, near the window
and felt the violent drum-beats of her heart.

His playing stopped. From outside, a fresh wind blew.
And strangely alien on the mirror-table
stood the black shako with its ivory skull.

Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Last Supper

They are assembled, astonished and disturbed
round him, who like a sage resolved his fate,
and now leaves those to whom he most belonged,
leaving and passing by them like a stranger.
The loneliness of old comes over him
which helped mature him for his deepest acts;
now will he once again walk through the olive grove,
and those who love him still will flee before his sight.

To this last supper he has summoned them,
and (like a shot that scatters birds from trees)
their hands draw back from reaching for the loaves
upon his word: they fly across to him;
they flutter, frightened, round the supper table
searching for an escape. But he is present
everywhere like an all-pervading twilight-hour.

[On seeing Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper", Milan 1904.]

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Lovers

See how in their veins all becomes spirit:
into each other they mature and grow.
Like axles, their forms tremblingly orbit,
round which it whirls, bewitching and aglow.
Thirsters, and they receive drink,
watchers, and see: they receive sight.
Let them into one another sink
so as to endure each other outright.

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Neighbor

Strange violin, why do you follow me?
In how many foreign cities did you
speak of your lonely nights and those of mine.
Are you being played by hundreds? Or by one?

Do in all great cities men exist
who tormented and in deep despair
would have sought the river but for you?
And why does your playing always reach me?

Why is it that I am always neighbor
to those lost ones who are forced to sing
and to say: Life is infinitely heavier
than the heaviness of all things.

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Panther

His vision, from the constantly passing bars,
has grown so weary that it cannot hold
anything else. It seems to him there are
a thousand bars; and behind the bars, no world.

As he paces in cramped circles, over and over,
the movement of his powerful soft strides
is like a ritual dance around a center
in which a mighty will stands paralyzed.

Only at times, the curtain of the pupils
lifts, quietly--. An image enters in,
rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles,
plunges into the heart and is gone.

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Poet

O hour of my muse: why do you leave me,
Wounding me by the wingbeats of your flight?
Alone: what shall I use my mouth to utter?

How shall I pass my days? And how my nights?

I have no one to love. I have no home.
There is no center to sustain my life.
All things to which I give myself grow rich
and leave me spent, impoverished, alone.

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Sisters

Look how the same possibilities
unfold in their opposite demeanors,
as though one saw different ages
passing through two identical rooms.

Each thinks that she props up the other,
while resting wearily on her support;
and they can't make use of one another,
for they cause blood to rest on blood,

when as in the former times they softly touch
and try, along the tree-lined walks,
to feel themselves conducted and to lead;
ah, the ways they go are not the same.

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Song Of The Beggar

I am always going from door to door,
whether in rain or heat,
and sometimes I will lay my right ear in
the palm of my right hand.
And as I speak my voice seems strange as if
it were alien to me,

for I'm not certain whose voice is crying:
mine or someone else's.
I cry for a pittance to sustain me.
The poets cry for more.

In the end I conceal my entire face
and cover both my eyes;
there it lies in my hands with all its weight
and looks as if at rest,
so no one may think I had no place where-
upon to lay my head.

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Song Of The Blindman

I am blind, you out there -- that is a curse,
against one's will, a contradiction,
a heavy daily burden.

I lay my hand on the arm of my wife,
my grey hand upon her greyer grey,
as she guides me through empty spaces.

You move about and stir, and imagine
your sounds differing from stone to stone.
But you are mistaken: I alone
live and suffer and complain, for
in me is an endless crying,
and I do not know whether it is
my heart that cries or my bowels.

Do you recognize these songs? You never sang them,
not quite with this intonation.
For you every morning brings its new light
warm through your open windows.
And you have the feeling from face to face
that tempts you to be indulgent.

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Song Of The Widow

In the beginning life was good to me;
it held me warm and gave me courage.
That this is granted all while in their youth,
how could I then have known of this.
I never knew what living was----.
But suddenly it was just year on year,
no more good, no more new, no more wonderful.
Life had been torn in two right down the middle.

That was not his fault nor mine
since both of us had nothing but patience;
but death has none.
I saw him coming (how rotten he looked),
and I watched him as he took and took:
and nothing was mine.

What, then, belonged to me; was mine, my own?
Was not even this utter wretchedness
on loan to me by fate?
Fate does not only claim your happiness,
it also wants your pain back and your tears
and buys the ruin as something useless, old.

Fate was present and acquired for a nothing
every expression my face is capable of,
even to the way I walk.
The daily diminishing of me went on
and after I was emptied fate gave me up
and left me standing there, abandoned.

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Sonnets To Orpheus: Book 2: I

Breathing: you invisible poem! Complete
interchange of our own
essence with world-space. You counterweight
in which I rythmically happen.

Single wave-motion whose
gradual sea I am:
you, most inclusive of all our possible seas-
space has grown warm.

How many regions in space have already been
inside me. There are winds that seem like
my wandering son.

Do you recognize me, air, full of places I once absorbed?
You who were the smooth bark,
roundness, and leaf of my words.

Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Sonnets To Orpheus: Book 2: VI

Rose, you majesty-once, to the ancients, you were
just a calyx with the simplest of rims.
But for us, you are the full, the numberless flower,
the inexhaustible countenance.

In your wealth you seem to be wearing gown upon gown
upon a body of nothing but light;
yet each separate petal is at the same time the negation
of all clothing and the refusal of it.

Your fragrance has been calling its sweetest names
in our direction, for hundreds of years;
suddenly it hangs in the air like fame.

Even so, we have never known what to call it; we guess...
And memory is filled with it unawares
which we prayed for from hours that belong to us.

Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Sonnets To Orpheus: Book 2: XIII

Be ahead of all parting, as though it already were
behind you, like the winter that has just gone by.
For among these winters there is one so endlessly winter
that only by wintering through it all will your heart survive.

Be forever dead in Eurydice-more gladly arise
into the seamless life proclaimed in your song.
Here, in the realm of decline, among momentary days,
be the crystal cup that shattered even as it rang.

Be-and yet know the great void where all things begin,
the infinite source of your own most intense vibration,
so that, this once, you may give it your perfect assent.

To all that is used-up, and to all the muffled and dumb
creatures in the world's full reserve, the unsayable sums,
joyfully add yourself, and cancel the count.

Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Sonnets To Orpheus: Book 2: XXIII

Call to me to the one among your moments
that stands against you, ineluctably:
intimate as a dog's imploring glance
but, again, forever, turned away

when you think you've captured it at last.
What seems so far from you is most your own.
We are already free, and were dismissed
where we thought we soon would be at home.

Anxious, we keep longing for a foothold-
we, at times too young for what is old
and too old for what has never been;

doing justice only where we praise,
because we are the branch, the iron blade,
and sweet danger, ripening from within.

Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Sonnets To Orpheus: I

A tree ascended there. Oh pure transcendence!
Oh Orpheus sings! Oh tall tree in the ear!
And all things hushed. Yet even in that silence
a new beginning, beckoning, change appeared.

Creatures of stillness crowded from the bright
unbound forest, out of their lairs and nests;
and it was not from any dullness, not
from fear, that they were so quiet in themselves,

but from just listening. Bellow, roar, shriek
seemed small inside their hearts. And where there had been
at most a makeshift hut to receive the music,

a shelter nailed up out of their darkest longing,
with an entryway that shuddered in the wind-
you built a temple deep inside their hearing.

Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Sonnets To Orpheus: IV

O you tender ones, walk now and then
into the breath that blows coldly past,
Upon your cheeks let it tremble and part;
behind you it will tremble together again.

O you blessed ones, you who are whole,
you who seem the beginning of hearts,
bows for the arrows and arrows' targets--
tear-bright, your lips more eternally smile.

Don't be afraid to suffer; return
that heaviness to the earth's own weight;
heavy are the mountains, heavy the seas.

Even the small trees you planted as children
have long since become too heavy; you could not
carry them now. But the winds...But the spaces....

Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Sonnets To Orpheus: X

You who are close to my heart always,
I welcome you, ancient coffins of stone,
which the cheerful water of Roman days
still flows through, like a wandering song.

Or those other ones that are open wide
like the eyes of a happily waking shepard
-with silence and bee-suck nettle inside,
from which ecstatic butterflies flittered;

everything that has been wrestled from doubt
I welcome-the mouths that burst open after
long knowledge of what it is to be mute.

Do we know this, my friends, or don't we know this?
Both are formed by the hesitant hour
in the deep calm of the human face.

Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Sonnets To Orpheus: XIX

Though the world keeps changing its form
as fast as a cloud, still
what is accomplished falls home
to the Primeval.

Over the change and the passing,
larger and freer,
soars your eternal song,
god with the lyre.

Never has grief been possessed,
never has love been learned,
and what removes us in death

is not revealed.
Only the song through the land
hallows and heals.

Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Sonnets To Orpheus: XXV

But you now, dear girl, whom I loved like a flower whose
name
I didn't know, you who so early were taken away:
I will once more call up your image and show it to them,
beautiful companion of the unsubduable cry.

Dancer whose body filled with your hesitant fate,
pausing, as though your young flesh had been cast in bronze;
grieving and listening--. Then, from the high dominions,
unearthly music fell into your altered heart.

Already possessed by shadows, with illness near,
your blood flowed darkly; yet, though for a moment
suspicious,
it burst out into the natural pulses of spring.

Again and again interrupted by downfall and darkness,
earthly, it gleamed. Till, after a terrible pounding,
it entered the inconsolably open door.

Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Spanish Dancer

As on all its sides a kitchen-match darts white
flickering tongues before it bursts into flame:
with the audience around her, quickened, hot,
her dance begins to flicker in the dark room.

And all at once it is completely fire.

One upward glance and she ignites her hair
and, whirling faster and faster, fans her dress
into passionate flames, till it becomes a furnace
from which, like startled rattlesnakes, the long
naked arms uncoil, aroused and clicking.

And then: as if the fire were too tight
around her body, she takes and flings it out
haughtily, with an imperious gesture,
and watches: it lies raging on the floor,
still blazing up, and the flames refuse to die -
Till, moving with total confidence and a sweet
exultant smile, she looks up finally
and stamps it out with powerful small feet.

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Swan

This laboring through what is still undone,
as though, legs bound, we hobbled along the way,
is like the awkward walking of the swan.

And dying-to let go, no longer feel
the solid ground we stand on every day-
is like anxious letting himself fall

into waters, which receive him gently
and which, as though with reverence and joy,
draw back past him in streams on either side;
while, infinitely silent and aware,
in his full majesty and ever more
indifferent, he condescends to glide.

Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Unicorn

The saintly hermit, midway through his prayers
stopped suddenly, and raised his eyes to witness
the unbelievable: for there before him stood
the legendary creature, startling white, that
had approached, soundlessly, pleading with his eyes.

The legs, so delicately shaped, balanced a
body wrought of finest ivory. And as
he moved, his coat shone like reflected moonlight.
High on his forehead rose the magic horn, the sign
of his uniqueness: a tower held upright
by his alert, yet gentle, timid gait.

The mouth of softest tints of rose and grey, when
opened slightly, revealed his gleaming teeth,
whiter than snow. The nostrils quivered faintly:
he sought to quench his thirst, to rest and find repose.
His eyes looked far beyond the saint's enclosure,
reflecting vistas and events long vanished,
and closed the circle of this ancient mystic legend.

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Voices

The rich and fortunate do well to keep silent,
for no one cares to know who and what they are.
But those in need must reveal themselves,
must say: I am blind,
or: I'm on the verge of going blind,
or: nothing goes well with me on earth,
or: I have a sickly child,
or: I have little to hold me together...

And chances are this is not nearly enough.

And because people try to ignore them as they
pass by them: these unfortunate ones have to sing!

And at times one hears some excellent singing!

Of course, people differ in their tastes: some would
prefer to listen to choirs of boy-castrati.

But God himself comes often and stays long,
when the castrati's singing disturbs Him.

Translated by Albert Ernest Flemming

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Wait

It is life in slow motion,
it's the heart in reverse,
it's a hope-and-a-half:
too much and too little at once.

It's a train that suddenly
stops with no station around,
and we can hear the cricket,
and, leaning out the carriage

door, we vainly contemplate
a wind we feel that stirs
the blooming meadows, the meadows
made imaginary by this stop.

Translated by A. Poulin

Rainer Maria Rilke

To Lou Andreas-Salome

I held myself too open, I forgot
that outside not just things exist and animals
fully at ease in themselves, whose eyes
reach from their lives' roundedness no differently
than portraits do from frames; forgot that I
with all I did incessantly crammed
looks into myself; looks, opinion, curiosity.
Who knows: perhaps eyes form in space
and look on everywhere. Ah, only plunged toward you
does my face cease being on display, grows
into you and twines on darkly, endlessly,
into your sheltered heart.

As one puts a handkerchief before pent-in-breath-
no: as one presses it against a wound
out of which the whole of life, in a single gush,
wants to stream, I held you to me: I saw you
turn red from me. How could anyone express
what took place between us? We made up for everything
there was never time for. I matured strangely
in every impulse of unperformed youth,
and you, love, had wildest childhood over my heart.

Memory won't suffice here: from those moments
there must be layers of pure existence
on my being's floor, a precipitate
from that immensely overfilled solution.

For I don't think back; all that I am
stirs me because of you. I don't invent you
at sadly cooled-off places from which
you've gone away; even your not being there
is warm with you and more real and more
than a privation. Longing leads out too often
into vagueness. Why should I cast myself, when,
for all I know, your influence falls on me,
gently, like moonlight on a window seat.

Translated by A. Poulin

Rainer Maria Rilke

To Music

Music: breathing of statues. Perhaps:
silence of paintings. You language where all language
ends. You time
standing vertically on the motion of mortal hearts.

Feelings for whom? O you the transformation
of feelings into what?--: into audible landscape.
You stranger: music. You heart-space
grown out of us. The deepest space in us,
which, rising above us, forces its way out,--
holy departure:
when the innermost point in us stands
outside, as the most practiced distance, as the other
side of the air:
pure,
boundless,
no longer habitable.

Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Rainer Maria Rilke

To Say Before Going to Sleep

I would like to sing someone to sleep,
have someone to sit by and be with.
I would like to cradle you and softly sing,
be your companion while you sleep or wake.
I would like to be the only person
in the house who knew: the night outside was cold.
And would like to listen to you
and outside to the world and to the woods.

The clocks are striking, calling to each other,
and one can see right to the edge of time.
Outside the house a strange man is afoot
and a strange dog barks, wakened from his sleep.
Beyond that there is silence.

My eyes rest upon your face wide-open;
and they hold you gently, letting you go
when something in the dark begins to move.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Venetian Morning

Windows pampered like princes always see
what on occasion deigns to trouble us:
the city that, time and again, where a shimmer
of sky strikes a feeling of floodtide,

takes shape without once choosing to be.
Each new morning must first show her the opals
she wore yesterday, and pull rows
of reflections out of the canal
and remind her of the other times:
only then does she concede and settle in

like a nymph who received great Zeus.
The dangling earrings ring out at her ear;
but she lifts San Giorgio Maggiore
and smiles idly into that lovely thing.

Translated by Edward Snow

Rainer Maria Rilke

Water Lily

My whole life is mine, but whoever says so
will deprive me, for it is infinite.
The ripple of water, the shade of the sky
are mine; it is still the same, my life.

No desire opens me: I am full,
I never close myself with refusal-
in the rythm of my daily soul
I do not desire-I am moved;

by being moved I exert my empire,
making the dreams of night real:
into my body at the bottom of the water
I attract the beyonds of mirrors...

Translated by A. Poulin

Rainer Maria Rilke

What Birds Plunge Through Is Not The Intimate Space

What birds plunge through is not the intimate space,
in which you see all Forms intensified.
(In the Open, denied, you would lose yourself,
would disappear into that vastness.)

Space reaches from us and translates Things:
to become the very essence of a tree,
throw inner space around it, from that space
that lives in you. Encircle it with restraint.
It has no limits. For the first time, shaped
in your renouncing, it becomes fully tree.

Submitted and Translated by Gabriel Caffrey

Rainer Maria Rilke

What Fields Are As Fragrant As Your Hands?

What fields are as fragrant as your hands?
You feel how external fragrance stands
upon your stronger resistance.
Stars stand in images above.
Give me your mouth to soften, love;
ah, your hair is all in idleness.

See, I want to surround you with yourself
and the faded expectation lift
from the edges of your eyebrows;
I want, as with inner eyelids sheer,
to close for you all places which appear
by my tender caresses now.

Translated by John J.L. Mood

Rainer Maria Rilke

What Survives

Who says that all must vanish?
Who knows, perhaps the flight
of the bird you wound remains,
and perhaps flowers survive
caresses in us, in their ground.

It isn't the gesture that lasts,
but it dresses you again in gold
armor --from breast to knees--
and the battle was so pure
an Angel wears it after you.

Translated by A. Poulin

Rainer Maria Rilke

Woman in Love

That is my window. Just now
I have so softly wakened.
I thought that I would float.
How far does my life reach,
and where does the night begin

I could think that everything
was still me all around;
transparent like a crystal's
depths, darkened, mute.

I could keep even the stars
within me; so immense
my heart seems to me; so willingly
it let him go again.

whom I began perhaps to love, perhaps to hold.
Like something strange, undreamt-of,
my fate now gazes at me.

For what, then, am I stretched out
beneath this endlessness,
exuding fragrance like a meadow,
swayed this way and that,

calling out and frightened
that someone will hear the call,
and destined to disappear
inside some other life.

Rainer Maria Rilke

World Was In The Face Of The Beloved

World was in the face of the beloved--,
but suddenly it poured out and was gone:
world is outside, world can not be grasped.

Why didn't I, from the full, beloved face
as I raised it to my lips, why didn't I drink
world, so near that I couldn't almost taste it?

Ah, I drank. Insatiably I drank.
But I was filled up also, with too much
world, and, drinking, I myself ran over.

Translated by Stephen Mitchell

Rainer Maria Rilke

You Who Never Arrived

You who never arrived
in my arms, Beloved, who were lost
from the start,
I don't even know what songs
would please you. I have given up trying
to recognize you in the surging wave of
the next moment. All the immense
images in me -- the far-off, deeply-felt
landscape, cities, towers, and bridges, and
unsuspected turns in the path,
and those powerful lands that were once
pulsing with the life of the gods--
all rise within me to mean
you, who forever elude me.

You, Beloved, who are all
the gardens I have ever gazed at,
longing. An open window
in a country house-- , and you almost
stepped out, pensive, to meet me.
Streets that I chanced upon,--
you had just walked down them and vanished.
And sometimes, in a shop, the mirrors
were still dizzy with your presence and,
startled, gave back my too-sudden image.
Who knows? Perhaps the same
bird echoed through both of us
yesterday, separate, in the evening...

Rainer Maria Rilke

You, you only, exist

You, you only, exist.
We pass away, till at last,
our passing is so immense
that you arise: beautiful moment,
in all your suddenness,
arising in love, or enchanted
in the contraction of work.

To you I belong, however time may
wear me away. From you to you
I go commanded. In between
the garland is hanging in chance; but if you
take it up and up and up: look:
all becomes festival!

Rainer Maria Rilke