

Rainer Maria Rilke

Duino Elegies

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The First Elegy

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the Angelic
Orders? And even if one were to suddenly
take me to its heart, I would vanish into its
stronger existence. For beauty is nothing but
the beginning of terror, that we are still able to bear,
and we revere it so, because it calmly disdains
to destroy us. Every Angel is terror.
And so I hold myself back and swallow the cry
of a darkened sobbing. Ah, who then can
we make use of? Not Angels: not men,
and the resourceful creatures see clearly
that we are not really at home
in the interpreted world. Perhaps there remains
some tree on a slope, that we can see
again each day: there remains to us yesterday's street,
and the thinned-out loyalty of a habit
that liked us, and so stayed, and never departed.
Oh, and the night, the night, when the wind full of space
wears out our faces – whom would she not stay for,
the longed-for, gentle, disappointing one, whom the solitary heart
with difficulty stands before. Is she less heavy for lovers?
Ah, they only hide their fate between themselves.
Do you not know yet? Throw the emptiness out of your arms
to add to the spaces we breathe; maybe the birds
will feel the expansion of air, in more intimate flight.

Yes, the Spring-times needed you deeply. Many a star
must have been there for you so you might feel it. A wave
lifted towards you out of the past, or, as you walked
past an open window, a violin
gave of itself. All this was their mission.
But could you handle it? Were you not always,
still, distracted by expectation, as if all you experienced,
like a Beloved, came near to you? (Where could you contain her,
with all the vast strange thoughts in you
going in and out, and often staying the night.)
But if you are yearning, then sing the lovers: for long
their notorious feelings have not been immortal enough.
Those, you almost envied them, the forsaken, that you
found as loving as those who were satisfied. Begin,
always as new, the unattainable praising:
think: the hero prolongs himself, even his falling
was only a pretext for being, his latest rebirth.
But lovers are taken back by exhausted Nature
into herself, as if there were not the power
to make them again. Have you remembered
[Gastara Stampa](#) sufficiently yet, that any girl,
whose lover has gone, might feel from that
intenser example of love: 'Could I only become like her?'
Should not these ancient sufferings be finally
fruitful for us? Isn't it time that, loving,
we freed ourselves from the beloved, and, trembling, endured
as the arrow endures the bow, so as to be, in its flight,
something more than itself? For staying is nowhere.

Voices, voices. Hear then, my heart, as only
saints have heard: so that the mighty call
raised them from the earth: they, though, knelt on
impossibly and paid no attention:
such was their listening. Not that you could withstand
God's voice: far from it. But listen to the breath,
the unbroken message that creates itself from the silence.
It rushes towards you now, from those youthfully dead.
Whenever you entered, didn't their fate speak to you,
quietly, in churches in Naples or Rome?
Or else an inscription exaltedly impressed itself on you,
as lately the tablet in [Santa Maria Formosa](#).
What do they will of me? That I should gently remove
the semblance of injustice, that slightly, at times,
hinders their spirits from a pure moving-on.

It is truly strange to no longer inhabit the earth,
to no longer practice customs barely acquired,
not to give a meaning of human futurity
to roses, and other expressly promising things:
no longer to be what one was in endlessly anxious hands,
and to set aside even one's own
proper name like a broken plaything.

Strange: not to go on wishing one's wishes. Strange
to see all that was once in place, floating
so loosely in space. And it's hard being dead,
and full of retrieval, before one gradually feels
a little eternity. Though the living
all make the error of drawing too sharp a distinction.
Angels (they say) would often not know whether
they moved among living or dead. The eternal current
sweeps all the ages, within it, through both the spheres,
forever, and resounds above them in both.

Finally they have no more need of us, the early-departed,
weaned gently from earthly things, as one outgrows
the mother's mild breast. But we, needing
such great secrets, for whom sadness is often
the source of a blessed progress, could we exist without them?
Is it a meaningless story how once, in the grieving for [Linus](#),
first music ventured to penetrate arid rigidity,
so that, in startled space, which an almost godlike youth
suddenly left forever, the emptiness first felt
the quivering that now enraptures us, and comforts, and helps.

The Second Elegy

Every Angel is terror. And yet,
ah, knowing you, I invoke you, almost deadly
birds of the soul. Where are the days of [Tobias](#),
when one of the most radiant of you stood at the simple threshold,
disguised somewhat for the journey and already no longer awesome
(Like a youth, to the youth looking out curiously).
Let the [Archangel](#) now, the dangerous one, from behind the stars,
take a single step down and toward us: our own heart,
beating on high would beat us down. What are you?

Early successes, Creation's favourite ones,
mountain-chains, ridges reddened by dawns
of all origin – pollen of flowering godhead,
junctions of light, corridors, stairs, thrones,
spaces of being, shields of bliss, tempests
of storm-filled, delighted feeling and, suddenly, solitary
mirrors: gathering their own out-streamed beauty
back into their faces again.

For we, when we feel, evaporate: oh, we
breathe ourselves out and away: from ember to ember,
yielding us fainter fragrance. Then someone may say to us:
'Yes, you are in my blood, the room, the Spring-time
is filling with you'..... What use is that: they cannot hold us,
we vanish inside and around them. And those who are beautiful,
oh, who holds them back? Appearance, endlessly, stands up,
in their face, and goes by. Like dew from the morning grass,
what is ours rises from us, like the heat
from a dish that is warmed. O smile: where? O upward gaze:
new, warm, vanishing wave of the heart - :
oh, we are that. Does the cosmic space,
we dissolve into, taste of us then? Do the Angels
really only take back what is theirs, what has streamed out of them,
or is there sometimes, as if by an oversight, something
of our being, as well? Are we as mingled with their
features, as there is vagueness in the faces
of pregnant women? They do not see it in the swirling
return to themselves. (How should they see it?)

Lovers, if they knew how, might utter
strange things in night air. Since it seems
everything hides us. Look, trees exist; houses,
we live in, still stand. Only we
pass everything by, like an exchange of air.
And all is at one, in keeping us secret, half out of
shame perhaps, half out of inexpressible hope.

Lovers, each satisfied in the other, I ask
you about us. You grasp yourselves. Have you a sign?
Look, it happens to me, that at times my hands
become aware of each other, or that my worn face
hides itself in them. That gives me a slight
sensation. But who would dare to exist only for that?
You, though, who grow in the other's delight
until, overwhelmed, they beg:
'No more' -: you, who under your hands
grow richer like vintage years of the vine:
who sometimes vanish, because the other
has so gained the ascendancy: I ask you of us. I know
you touch so blissfully because the caress withholds,
because the place you cover so tenderly
does not disappear: because beneath it you feel
pure duration. So that you promise eternity
almost, from the embrace. And yet, when you've endured
the first terrible glances, and the yearning at windows,
and the first walk together, just once, through the garden:
Lovers, are you the same? When you raise yourselves
one to another's mouth, and hang there – sip against sip:
O, how strangely the drinker then escapes from their action.

Weren't you amazed by the caution of human gesture
on Attic steles? Weren't love and departure
laid so lightly on shoulders, they seemed to be made
of other matter than ours? Think of the hands
how they rest without weight, though there is power in the torso.
Those self-controlled ones know, through that: so much is ours,
this is us, to touch our own selves so: the gods
may bear down more heavily on us. But that is the gods' affair.
If only we too could discover a pure, contained
human place, a strip of fruitful land of our own,
between river and stone! For our own heart exceeds us,
even as theirs did. And we can no longer
gaze after it into images, that soothe it, or into
godlike bodies, where it restrains itself more completely.

The Third Elegy

To sing the beloved is one thing, another, oh,
that hidden guilty river-god of the blood.
What does he know, himself, of that lord of desire, her young lover,
whom she knows distantly, who often out of his solitariness,
before the girl soothed him, often, as if she did not exist,
held up, dripping, from what unknowable depths,
his godhead, oh, rousing the night to endless uproar?
O Neptune of the blood, O his trident of terrors.
O the dark storm-wind from his chest, out of the twisted conch.
Hear, how the night becomes thinned-out and hollow. You, stars,
is it not from you that the lover's joy in the beloved's
face rises? Does he not gain his innermost insight,
into her face's purity, from the pure stars?

It was not you, alas, not his mother
that bent the arc of his brow into such expectation.
Not for you, girl, feeling his presence, not for you,
did his lips curve into a more fruitful expression.
Do you truly think that your light entrance
rocked him so, you who wander like winds at dawn?
You terrified his heart, that's so: but more ancient terrors
plunged into him with the impetus of touching.
Call him...you can't quite call him away from that dark companion.
Of course he wants to, and does, escape: relieved, winning
his way into your secret heart, and takes on, and begins himself.
Did he ever begin himself, though?
Mother you made his littleness: you were the one who began him:
to you he was new, you hung the friendly world
over new eyes, and defended him from what was strange.
Oh where are the years when you simply repelled
the surging void for him, with your slight form?
You hid so much from him then: you made the suspect room
harmless at night, from your heart filled with refuge
mixed a more human space with his spaces of night.
Not in the darkness, no, in your nearer being
you placed the light, and it shone as if out of friendship.
There wasn't a single creaking you couldn't explain with a smile,
as if you had long known when the floor would do so....
And he heard you and was soothed. Your being
was so tenderly potent: his fate there stepped,
tall and cloaked, behind the wardrobe, and his restless future,
so easily delayed, fitted the folds of the curtain.

And he himself, as he lay there, relieved,
dissolving a sweetness, of your gentle creation,
under his sleepy eyelids, into the sleep he had tasted - :
seemed protected.....But inside: who could hinder,
prevent, the primal flood inside him?
Ah, there was little caution in the sleeper: sleeping,
but dreaming, but fevered: what began there!
How, new, fearful, he was tangled
in ever-spreading tendrils of inner event:
already twisted in patterns, in strangling growths,
among prowling bestial forms. How he gave himself to it -. Loved.
Loved his inward world, his inner wilderness,
that first world within, on whose mute overthrow
his heart stood, newly green. Loved. Relinquished it, went on,
through his own roots, to the vast fountain
where his little birth was already outlived. Lovingly
went down into more ancient bloodstreams, into ravines
where Horror lay, still gorged on his forefathers. And every
Terror knew him, winked, like an informant.
Yes, Dread smiled.....Seldom
have you smiled so tenderly, mothers. How could he
help loving what smiled at him. Before you
he loved it, since, while you carried him,
it was dissolved in the waters, that render the embryo light.

See, we don't love like flowers, in a
single year: when we love, an ancient
sap rises in our arms. O, girls,
this: that we loved inside us, not one to come, but
the immeasurable seething: not a single child,
but the fathers: resting on our depths
like the rubble of mountains: the dry river-beds
of those who were mothers - : the whole
silent landscape under a clouded or
clear destiny - : girls, this came before you.

And you yourself, how could you know – that you
stirred up primordial time in your lover. What feelings
welled up from lost lives. What
women hated you there. What sinister men
you roused up in his young veins. Dead
children wanted you.....O, gently, gently,
show him with love a confident daily task - lead him
near to the Garden, give him what outweighs
those nights.....

Be in him.....

The Fourth Elegy

O trees of life, O when are you wintering?
We are not unified. We have no instincts
like those of migratory birds. Useless, and late,
we force ourselves, suddenly, onto the wind,
and fall down to an indifferent lake.
We realise flowering and fading together.
And somewhere lions still roam. Never knowing,
as long as they have their splendour, of any weakness.

We, though, while we are intent on one thing, wholly,
feel the loss of some other. Enmity
is our neighbour. Aren't lovers
always arriving at boundaries, each of the other,
who promised distance, hunting, and home?
And when, for the sketch of a moment,
a contrasting background is carefully prepared
so that we can see it: then this is clear
to us. We do not know the contours
of feeling, only what forms it from outside.
Who has not sat, scared, before his heart's curtain?
It drew itself up: the scenery was of Departure.
Easy to comprehend. The familiar garden
swaying a little: then the dancer appeared.
Not him. Enough! However lightly he moves
he is in costume, and turns into a citizen,
and goes through the kitchen into his house.
I don't want these half-completed masks,
rather the Doll. That is complete. I will
suffer its shell, its wire, its face
of mere appearance. Here. I am waiting.
Even if the lights go out, even if someone
says to me: 'No more' - , even if emptiness
reaches me as a grey draught of air from the stage,
even if none of my silent forefathers
sits by me any more, not one woman,
not even [the boy](#) with the brown, squinting, eyes.
I'll still be here. One can always watch.

Am I not right? You, to whom life tasted
so bitter, father, tasting mine,
that first clouded infusion of my necessities,
you kept on tasting, as I grew,
and preoccupied by the after-taste
of such a strange future, searched my misted gaze –
you, my father, who since you were dead, have often
been anxious within my innermost hopes,
and giving up calm, the kingdoms of calm
the dead own, for my bit of fate,
am I not right? And you women, am I not right,
who would love me for that small beginning
of love, for you, that I always turned away from,
because the space of your faces changed,
as I loved, into cosmic space,
where you no longer existed.....When I feel
like waiting in front of the puppet theatre, no,
rather gazing at it, so intently, that at last,
to balance my gaze, an Angel must come
and take part, dragging the puppets on high.
Angel and Doll: then there's a play at last.
Then what we endlessly separate,
merely by being, comes together. Then at last
from our seasons here, the orbit
of all change emerges. Over and above us,
then, the Angel plays. See the dying
must realise that what we do here
is nothing, how full of pretext it all is,
nothing in itself. O hours of childhood,
when, behind the images, there was more
than the past, and in front of us was not the future.
We were growing, it's true, and sometimes urged that
we soon grew up, half for the sake
of those others who had nothing but their grown-up-ness.
And were, yet, on our own, happy
with Timelessness, and stood there,
in the space between world and plaything,

at a point that from first beginnings
had been marked out for pure event.

Who shows a child, just as they are? Who sets it
in its constellation, and gives the measure
of distance into its hand? Who makes a child's death
out of grey bread, that hardens, - or leaves it
inside its round mouth like the core
of a shining apple? Killers are
easy to grasp. But this: death,
the whole of death, before life,
to hold it so softly, and not live in anger,
cannot be expressed.

The Fifth Elegy

But who are they, tell me, [these Travellers](#), even more
transient than we are ourselves, urgently, from their earliest days,
wrung out for whom – to please whom,
by a never-satisfied will? Yet it wrings them,
bends them, twists them, and swings them,
throws them, and catches them again: as if from oiled
more slippery air, so they land
on the threadbare carpet, worn by their continual
leaping, this carpet
lost in the universe.
Stuck on like a plaster, as if the suburban
sky had wounded the earth there.

And scarcely there,
upright, there and revealed: the great
capital letter of Being.....and already the ever-returning
grasp wrings the strongest of men again, in jest,
as King August the Strong would crush
a tin plate.

Ah, and around this
centre, the rose of watching
flowers and un-flowers. Round this
stamp, this pistil, caught in the pollen
of its own flowering, fertilised
again to a shadow-fruit of disinterest,
their never-conscious, seeming-to-smile, disinterest,
gleaming lightly, on surface thinness.

There, the withered, wrinkled lifter,
an old man, only a drummer now,
shrunk in his massive hide, as though it had once
contained two men, and one was already
lying there in the churchyard, and the other had survived him,
deaf, and sometimes a little
confused in his widowed skin.

And the young one, the man, as if he were son of a neck
and a nun: taut and erectly filled
with muscle and simple-mindedness.

O you,
that a sorrow, that was still small,
once received as a plaything, in one of its
long convalescences.....

You, who fall, with the thud
that only fruit knows, unripe,
a hundred times a day from the tree of mutually
built-up movement (that, swifter than water,
in a few moments, shows spring, summer and autumn),
fall, and impact on the grave:
sometimes, in half-pauses, a loving look tries
to rise from your face towards your seldom
affectionate mother: but it loses itself in your body,
whose surface consumes the shy
scarcely-attempted look.....And again
the man is clapping his hands for your leap, and before
a pain can become more distinct, close to your
constantly racing heart, a burning grows in the soles of your feet,
its source, before a few quick tears rush bodily into your eyes.
And yet, blindly,
that smile.....

Angel! O, gather it, pluck it, that small-flowered healing herb.
Make a vase, keep it safe! Place it among those joys not yet
open to us: on a lovely urn,
praise it, with flowery, swirling, inscription:

‘Subrisio Saltat: the Saltimbanque’s smile’

You, then, beloved,
you, that the loveliest delights
silently over-leapt. Perhaps
your frills are happy for you –
or the green metallic silk,
over your firm young breasts,
feels itself endlessly pampered, and needing nothing.
You, market fruit of serenity
laid out, endlessly, on all the quivering balance scales,
publicly, beneath the shoulders.

Where, oh where is the place – I carry it in my heart –
where they were still far from capable, still fell away
from each other, like coupling animals, not yet
ready for pairing: -
where the weights are still heavy:
where the plates still topple
from their vainly twirling
sticks.....

And, suddenly, in this troublesome nowhere, suddenly,
the unsayable point where the pure too-little
is changed incomprehensibly -, altered
into that empty too-much.
Where the many-placed calculation
is exactly resolved.

Squares: O square in Paris, endless show-place,
where the milliner, Madame Lamort,
winds and twists the restless trails of the earth,
endless ribbons, into new
bows, frills, flowers, rosettes, artificial fruits – all
falsely coloured, - for winter's
cheap hats of destiny.

Angel: if there were a place we know nothing of, and there,
on some unsayable carpet, lovers revealed
what here they could never master, their high daring
figures of heart's flight,
their towers of desire, their ladders,
long since standing where there was no ground, leaning,
trembling, on each other – and mastered them,
in front of the circle of watchers, the countless, soundless dead:
Would these not fling their last, ever-saved,
ever-hidden, unknown to us, eternally
valid coins of happiness in front of the finally
truly smiling pair on the silent
carpet?

The Sixth Elegy

Fig-tree, for such a long time now, there has been meaning for me,
in the way you almost wholly omit to flower
and urge your pure secret, unheralded,
into the early, resolute fruit.

Like the jet of a fountain, your arched bough
drives the sap downward, then up: and it leaps from its sleep
barely waking, into the bliss of its sweetest achievement.

See: like the god into the swan

.....We, though, linger,
ah, our pride is in flowering, and, already betrayed,
we reach the late core of our final fruit.

In a few the urge to action rises so powerfully,
that they are already waiting and glowing with their heart's fullness
when the temptation to flower, like the mild night air,
touches their tender mouths, touches their eyelids:
heroes perhaps, and those chosen to vanish prematurely,
in whom Death the gardener wove different veins.
These plunge ahead: they go before their own smile,
like the team of horses in the slightly
hollowed-out relief of Karnak's victorious pharaoh.

The hero is strangely close to those who died young. Lasting
doesn't contain him. Being is his ascent: he moves on,
time and again, to enter the changed constellation
his risk entails. Few could find him there. But
Destiny, that darkly hides us, suddenly inspired,
sings him into the tempest of his onrushing world.
I hear no one like him. All at once I am pierced
by his darkened sound carried on streaming air.

Then, how gladly I would hide from the yearning: O if I,
if I were a boy, and might come to it still, and sit,
propped on the future's arms, and reading about Samson,
how his mother first bore nothing, and then all.

Was he not a hero already, O mother, in you, did not
his imperious choice begin inside you?
Thousands seethed in the womb and willed to be him,
but see: he grasped and let go, chose and achieved.
And if he shattered pillars, it was when he burst
out of the world of your flesh into the narrower world,
where he went on choosing, achieving. O mothers of heroes,
O sources of ravening rivers! Ravines into which
weeping girls have plunged
from the high heart's edge, future offerings to the son.
Because, whenever the hero stormed through the stations of love,
each heartbeat, meant for him, lifting him onward,
he turned away, stood at the end of the smiles, someone other.

The Seventh Elegy

Wooing, no longer: wooing will not be the form of your
cry, voice that's outgrown it: true, you would cry pure as a bird,
when the season lifts him, the ascending one, almost forgetting
that he is a suffering creature, and not just a solitary heart
that it flings into brightness, to intimate heavens. Like him,
you also, would be wooing no less – so that, still invisible,
some girl would sense you, the silent one, in whom a reply
slowly wakes and grows warm, as she listens –
the glowing feeling mated to your daring feeling.
Oh and the Spring-time would comprehend – there is no place
that would not echo its voice of proclamation.
First the tiny questioning piping, that a purely affirmative day
surrounds more deeply with heightened stillness.
Then up the stairway, the stairway of calling, up to
the dreamed-of temple of future - : then the trill, fountain
that in its rising jet already anticipates falling,
in promise's play.....And the summer to come.
Not only the devotion of these unfolded forces,
not only the paths, not only the evening fields,
not only, after a late storm, the breathing freshness,
not only approaching sleep and a premonition, evenings...
also the nights! Also the high summer nights,
also the stars, the stars of this Earth!
O to be dead at last and know them eternally,
all the stars: for how, how, how to forget them!

See, I was calling my lover. But not only she
would come.....Girls would come from delicate graves
and gather.....for, how could I limit
the call, once called? The buried always
still seek the Earth. – You, children, a single
thing grasped here is many times valid.
Don't think that Fate is more than a childhood across:
how often you overtook the beloved, panting,
panting after the blissful chase after nothing, into what's free.
Being here is the wonder. You knew it, girls, even you,
you who seemed dispensable, sunken – you, in the worst
streets of the cities, festering, or open
for refuse. Since an hour was given – perhaps not
so much as an hour, one that was scarcely
measurable by time's measure, between two moments, where you
had a being. Everything. Veins filled with being.
But we forget so easily what our laughing neighbour
neither acknowledges nor envies. We want to visibly
show it, while even the most visible of joys
can only display itself to us when we have changed it, from within.
Nowhere, beloved, will world be, but within. Our
life passes in change. And ever-shrinking
the outer diminishes. Where there was once a permanent house,
some conceptual structure springs up, athwart us, as fully
at home among concepts, as if it still stood in the brain.
Vast reservoirs of power are created by the spirit of the age,
formless, like the tense yearning gained from all things.
Temples are no longer known. Those extravagances
of the heart we keep, more secretly. Yes, where even one survives,
a single thing once prayed to, served, knelt before –
it stands, as it is, already there in the invisible.
Many no longer see it, but lose the chance to build it
inside themselves now, with columns, and statues, grander!

Each vague turn of the world has such disinherited ones,
to whom the former does not, and the next does not yet, belong.
Since even the next is far from mankind. Though
this should not confuse us, but strengthen in us the keeping
of still recognisable forms. This once stood among men,
stood in the midst of fate, the destroyer, stood
in the midst of not-knowing-towards-what, as if it existed, and drew
stars towards itself out of the enshrined heavens. Angel,
I'll show it to you, also, there! It will stand
in your gaze, finally upright, saved at last.
Columns, pylons, the Sphinx, the stirring thrust
of the cathedral, grey, out of a fading or alien city.

Was it not miracle? O, be astonished, Angel, since we are this,
O tell them, O great one, that we could achieve this: my breath
is too slight for this praising. So, after all, we have not
failed to make use of these spaces, these generous ones,
our spaces. (How frighteningly vast they must be,
when they are not overfull of our feelings, after thousands of years.)
But a tower was great, was it not? O Angel, it was though –
even compared to you? Chartres was great – and Music
towered still higher and went beyond us. Why even
a girl in love, oh, alone in the night, at her window,
did she not reach to your knees? –

Don't think that I'm wooing.

Angel, were I doing so, you would not come! Since my call
is always full of outpouring: against such a powerful
current you cannot advance. Like an outstretched
arm, my call. And its hand, opened above
for grasping, remains open, before you,
as if for defence and for warning,
wide open, Incomprehensible One.

The Eighth Elegy

The creature gazes into openness with all
its eyes. But our eyes are
as if they were reversed, and surround it,
everywhere, like barriers against its free passage.
We know what is outside us from the animal's
face alone: since we already turn
the young child round and make it look
backwards at what is settled, not that openness
that is so deep in the animal's vision. Free from death.
We alone see that: the free creature
has its progress always behind it,
and God before it, and when it moves, it moves
in eternity, as streams do.
We never have pure space in front of us,
not for a single day, such as flowers open
endlessly into. Always there is world,
and never the Nowhere without the Not: the pure,
unwatched-over, that one breathes and
endlessly knows, without craving. As a child
loses itself sometimes, one with the stillness, and
is jolted back. Or someone dies and is it.
Since near to death one no longer sees death,
and stares ahead, perhaps with the large gaze of the creature.
Lovers are close to it, in wonder, if
the other were not always there closing off the view.....
As if through an oversight it opens out
behind the other.....But there is no
way past it, and it turns to world again.
Always turned towards creation, we see
only a mirroring of freedom
dimmed by us. Or that an animal
mutely, calmly is looking through and through us.
This is what fate means: to be opposite,
and to be that and nothing else, opposite, forever.

If there was consciousness like ours
in the sure creature, that moves towards us
on a different track – it would drag us
round in its wake. But its own being
is boundless, unfathomable, and without a view
of its condition, pure as its outward gaze.
And where we see future it sees everything,
and itself in everything, and is healed for ever.

And yet in the warm waking creature
is the care and burden of a great sadness.
Since it too always has within it what often
overwhelms us – a memory,
as if what one is pursuing now was once
nearer, truer, and joined to us
with infinite tenderness. Here all is distance,
there it was breath. Compared to that first home
the second one seems ambiguous and uncertain.

O bliss of little creatures
that stay in the womb that carried them forever:
O joy of the midge that can still leap within,
even when it is wed: since womb is all.
And see the half-assurance of the bird,
almost aware of both from its inception,
as if it were the soul of an Etruscan,
born of a dead man in a space
with his reclining figure as the lid.
And how dismayed anything is that has to fly,
and leave the womb. As if it were
terrified of itself, zig-zagging through the air, as a crack
runs through a cup. As the track
of a bat rends the porcelain of evening.

And we: onlookers, always, everywhere,
always looking into, never out of, everything.
It fills us. We arrange it. It collapses.
We arrange it again, and collapse ourselves.

Who has turned us round like this, so that,
whatever we do, we always have the aspect
of one who leaves? Just as they
will turn, stop, linger, for one last time,
on the last hill, that shows them all their valley - ,
so we live, and are always taking leave.

The Ninth Elegy

Why, if it could begin as laurel, and be spent so,
this space of Being, a little darker than all
the surrounding green, with little waves at the edge
of every leaf (like a breeze's smile) - : why then
have to be human – and shunning destiny
long for destiny?....

Oh, not because happiness exists,
that over-hasty profit from imminent loss,
not out of curiosity, or to practice the heart,
which could exist in the laurel.....

But because being here is much, and because all
that's here seems to need us, the ephemeral, that
strangely concerns us. We: the most ephemeral. Once,
for each thing, only once. Once, and no more. And we too,
once. Never again. But this
once, to have been, though only once,
to have been an earthly thing – seems irrevocable.

And so we keep pushing on, and trying to achieve it,
trying to contain it in our simple hands,
in the overflowing gaze and the speechless heart.
Trying to become it. Whom to give it to? We would
hold on to it for ever....Ah, what, alas, do we
take into that other dimension? Not the gazing which we
slowly learned here, and nothing that happened. Nothing.
Suffering then. Above all, then, the difficulty,
the long experience of love, then – what is
wholly unsayable. But later,
among the stars, what use is it: it is better unsayable.
Since the traveller does not bring a handful of earth
from mountain-slope to valley, unsayable to others, but only
a word that was won, pure, a yellow and blue
gentian. Are we here, perhaps, for saying: house,
bridge, fountain, gate, jug, fruit-tree, window –
at most: column, tower.....but for saying, realise,
oh, for a saying such as the things themselves would never
have profoundly said. Is not the secret intent
of this discreet Earth to draw lovers on,
so that each and every thing is delight within their feeling?
Threshold: what is it for two
lovers to be wearing their own threshold of the ancient door
a little, they too, after the many before them,
and before those to come....., simple.

Here is the age of the sayable: here is its home.
Speak, and be witness. More than ever
the things of experience are falling away, since
what ousts and replaces them is an act with no image.
An act, under a crust that will split, as soon as
the business within outgrows it, and limit itself differently.
Between the hammers, our heart
lives on, as the tongue
between the teeth, that
in spite of them, keeps praising.

Praise the world to the Angel, not the unsayable: you
can't impress him with glories of feeling: in the universe,
where he feels more deeply, you are a novice. So show
him a simple thing, fashioned in age after age,
that lives close to hand and in sight.
Tell him things. He'll be more amazed: as you were,
beside the rope-maker in Rome, or the potter beside the Nile.
Show him how happy things can be, how guiltless and ours,
how even the cry of grief decides on pure form,
serves as a thing, or dies into a thing: transient,
they look to us for deliverance, we, the most transient of all.
Will us to change them completely, in our invisible hearts,
into – oh, endlessly, into us! Whoever, in the end, we are.

Earth, is it not this that you want: to rise
invisibly in us? – Is that not your dream,
to be invisible, one day? – Earth! Invisible!
What is your urgent command if not transformation?
Earth, beloved, I will. O, believe me, you need
no more Spring-times to win me: only one,
ah, one, is already more than my blood can stand.
Namelessly, I have been truly yours, from the first.
You were always right, and your most sacred inspiration
is that familiar Death.
See I live. On what? Neither childhood nor future
grows less.....Excess of being
wells up in my heart.

The Tenth Elegy

Some day, in the emergence from this fierce insight,
let me sing jubilation and praise to assenting Angels.
Let not a single one of the cleanly-struck hammers of my heart
deny me, through a slack, or a doubtful, or
a broken string. Let my streaming face
make me more radiant: let my secret weeping
bear flower. O, how dear you will be to me, then, Nights
of anguish. Inconsolable sisters, why did I not
kneel more to greet you, lose myself more
in your loosened hair? We, squanderers of pain.
How we gaze beyond them into duration's sadness,
to see if they have an end. Though they are nothing but
our winter-suffering foliage, our dark evergreen,
one of the seasons of our inner year – not only
season - : but place, settlement, camp, soil, dwelling.

Strange, though, alas, the streets of Grief-City,
where, in the artificiality of a drowned-out false
stillness, the statue cast from the mould of emptiness bravely
swaggers: the gilded noise, the flawed memorial.
O, how an Angel would utterly trample their market of solace,
bounded by the Church, bought ready for use:
untouched, disenchanted and shut like the post-office on Sunday.
Beyond though, the outskirts are always alive with the fair.
Swings of freedom! Divers and jugglers of zeal!
And the figures at the shooting range of easy luck,
targets that shake tinnily whenever some better marksman
hits one. From applause at his luck
he staggers on further: as booths for every taste
are wooing him, drumming, and bawling. Here's something
special, only for adults, to view: how money is got, anatomy,
not just to amuse: the private parts of money,
all of it, the whole thing, the act, - to instruct and make
potent.....O, but just beyond
behind the last hoarding, plastered with adverts for 'Deathless',
that bitter beer that tastes sweet to its drinkers,
as long as they chew fresh distractions along with it.....
just at the back of the hoardings, just behind them, it's real.
Children are playing, lovers are holding each other – to the side,
sombrely, in the sparse grass, and dogs are following their nature.
The youth is drawn on, further: perhaps it's a young
Lament he loves.....He comes to the field, beyond her. She says:
'It's far. We live out there....'

'Where?' And the youth follows.

He is moved by her manner. Her shoulders, her neck – perhaps
she's from a notable family. But he leaves her, turns round,
looks back, waves.....What's the point? She's a Lament.

Only those who died young, in their first state
of timeless equanimity, that of being weaned,
follow her lovingly. She waits
for girls and befriends them. She shows them gently
what she is wearing. Pearls of grief and the fine
veils of suffering. – With youths she walks on
in silence.

But there, where they live, in the valley, one of the older Laments,
takes to the youth, when he questions: - ‘We were,’
she says, ‘a large family once, we Laments. Our ancestors
worked the mines on that mountain-range: among men
you’ll sometimes find a lump of polished primal grief,
or the lava of frozen rage from some old volcano.
Yes, that came from there. We used to be rich.’ -

And she leads him gently through the wide landscape of Lament,
shows him the columns of temples, the ruins
of castles, from which the lords of Lament
ruled the land, wisely. Shows him the tall
Tear-trees, and the fields of flowering Sadness,
(The living know it as only a tender shrub.)
shows him the herds of Grief, grazing – and sometimes
a startled bird, flying low through their upward glance,
will inscribe on the far distance the written form of its lonely cry –
At evening she leads him to the graves of the elders
of the race of Laments, the sibyls and prophets.
But as night falls, so they move more softly, and soon,
like a moon, the all-guarding
sepulchre rises. Brother to that of the Nile,
the tall Sphinx, the secret chamber's
countenance.
And they are astonished by the regal head, that forever,
silently, positioned the human face
in the scale of the stars.

His sight cannot grasp it, still dizzied
by early death. But her gaze
frightens an owl from behind the rim of the crown,
and the bird brushes, with slow skimming flight, along the cheek,
the one with the richer curve,
and inscribes the indescribable
outline, on the new
hearing born out of death, as though
on the doubly-unfolded page of a book.

And higher: the stars. New stars, of Grief-Land.
Slowly the Lament names them: 'There,
see: the *Rider*, the *Staff*, and that larger constellation
they name *Fruit-Garland*. Then, further, towards the Pole:
the *Cradle*, the *Way*, the *Burning Book*, the *Doll*, the *Window*.
But in the southern sky, pure as on
the palm of a sacred hand, the clearly shining *M*,
that stands for the Mothers.....'

But the dead must go on, and in silence the elder Lament
leads him as far as the ravine,
where the fountain of joy
glistens in moonlight. With awe
she names it saying: 'Among men
this is a load-bearing river.'

They stand at the foot of the mountains.
And there she embraces him, weeping.

He climbs alone, on the mountains of primal grief.
And not once do his footsteps sound from his silent fate.

But if the endlessly dead woke a symbol in us,
see, they would point perhaps to the catkins,
hanging from bare hazels, or
they would intend the rain, falling on dark soil in Spring-time. —

And we, who think of ascending
joy, would feel the emotion,
that almost dismays us,
when a joyful thing falls.

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Notes

Gaspara Stampa. 1523-1554. Famous for her intense love for the young Lord of Treviso, Collaltino, which he was ultimately unable to return. She wrote some two hundred sonnets telling the story of her love for him, dying at the age of thirty-one. She was for Rilke a 'type' of unrequited love.

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Santa Maria Formosa. The church, in Venice, which Rilke visited in 1911. The reference is to one of the commemorative tablets, inscribed with Latin texts, on the church walls.

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Linos. The mythical poet: in some versions of Greek myth, he is the brother of Orpheus, and son of Calliope the Muse. The ancient 'Lament for Linos' was part of the vegetation rituals mentioned by Homer (Iliad XVIII, 570). The Greek myths provide a complex of hints about him, that involve, song and music, ritual lament, and the sacred nature of poetry.

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Tobias. The Book of Tobit in the Apocrypha (5:4,16) tells the story of Tobit the Israelite, who ordered his son Tobias to go and recover some of his property from Media. The Archangel Raphael, disguised, guided the young man. 'So they went forth, and the young man's dog with them.'

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The boy with the brown squinting eyes. Rilke's cousin, Egon von Rilke, who died in childhood. His brown eyes were 'disfigured by a squint'.

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Les Saltimbanques. This elegy is founded on Rilke's knowledge of Picasso's painting Les Saltimbanques (he lived, from June to October 1915, in the house where the original hung, in Munich).

Picasso depicts a family of travelling acrobats. Rilke was familiar with such people from his stay in Paris, where he became Rodin's secretary.

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