

Duino Elegies – The Third Elegy

By Rainer Maria Rilke

It is one thing to sing the beloved. Another, alas,
to invoke that hidden, guilty river-god of the blood.
Her young lover, whom she knows from far away-what
does he know of
the lord of desire who often, up from the depths of his
solitude,
even before she could soothe him, and as though she didn't
exist,
held up his head, ah, dripping with the unknown,
erect, and summoned the night to an endless uproar.
Oh the Neptune inside our blood, with his appalling trident.
Oh the dark wind from his breast out of that spiraled conch.
Listen to the night as it makes itself hollow. O stars,
isn't it from you that the lover's desire for the face
of his beloved arises? Doesn't his secret insight
into her pure features come from the pure constellations?

Not you, his mother: alas, you were not the one
who bent the arch of his eyebrows into such expectation.
Not for you, girl so aware of him, not for your mouth
did his lips curve themselves into a more fruitful expression.
Do you really think that your gentle steps could have shaken
him
with such violence, you who move like the morning breeze?
Yes, you did frighten his heart; but more ancient terrors
plunged into him at the shock of that feeling. Call him . . .
but you can't quite call him away from those dark
companions.
Of course, he wants to escape, and he does; relieved, he
nestles
into your sheltering heart, takes hold, and begins himself.

But did he ever begin himself, really?
Mother, you made him small, it was you who started him;
in your sight he was new, over his new eyes you arched
the friendly world and warded off the world that was alien.
Ah, where are the years when you shielded him just by
placing
your slender form between him and the surging abyss?
How much you hid from him then. The room that filled
with suspicion
at night: you made it harmless; and out of the refuge of your
heart
you mixed a more human space in with his night-space.
And you set down the lamp, not in that darkness, but in
your own nearer presence, and it glowed at him like a friend.
There wasn't a creak that your smile could not explain,
as though you had long known just when the floor would do
that...
And he listened and was soothed. So powerful was your
presence
as you tenderly stood by the bed; his fate,
tall and cloaked, retreated behind the wardrobe, and his
restless
future, delayed for a while, adapted to the folds of the
curtain.

And he himself, as he lay there, relieved, with the sweetness
of the gentle world you had made for him dissolving beneath
his drowsy eyelids, into the foretaste of sleep-:
he seemed protected . . . But inside: who could ward off,
who could divert, the floods of origin inside him?
Ah, there was no trace of caution in that sleeper; sleeping,
yes but dreaming, but flushed with what fevers: how he
threw himself in.
All at once new, trembling, how he was caught up
and entangled in the spreading tendrils of inner event
already twined into patterns, into strangling undergrowth,

prowling

bestial shapes. How he submitted-. Loved.

Loved his interior world, his interior wilderness,
that primal forest inside him, where among decayed
tree trunks

his heart stood, light-green. Loved. Left it, went through
his own roots and out, into the powerful source
where his little birth had already been outlived. Loving,
he waded down into more ancient blood, to ravines
where Horror lay, still glutted with his fathers. And every
Terror knew him, winked at him like an accomplice.

Yes, Atrocity smiled . . . Seldom

had you smiled so tenderly, mother. How could he help
loving what smiled at him. Even before he knew you,
he had loved it, for already while you carried him inside you,
it

was dissolved in the water that makes the embryo weightless.

No, we don't accomplish our love in a single year
as the flowers do; an immemorial sap

flows up through our arms when we love. Dear girl,
this: that we loved, inside us, not One who would someday
appear, but

seething multitudes; not just a single child,

but also the fathers lying in our depths

like fallen mountains; also the dried-up riverbeds

of ancient mothers-; also the whole

soundless landscape under the clouded or clear
sky of its destiny-: all this, my dear, preceded you.

And you yourself, how could you know

what primordial time you stirred in your lover. What
passions

welled up inside him from departed beings. What

women hated you there. How many dark

sinister men you aroused in his young veins. Dead

children reached out to touch you . . . Oh gently, gently,

let him see you performing, with love, some confident daily

task,-

lead him out close to the garden, give him what outweighs
the heaviest night

Restrain him

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"The Ninth Elegy"

Duino Elegies

Why, if it's possible to spend this span
of existence as laurel, a little darker than all
other greens, with little waves on every
leaf-edge (like the smile of a breeze), why, then,
must we be human and, shunning destiny,
long for it?...

Oh, not because happiness,
that over-hasty profit of loss impending, *exists*.
Not from curiosity, or to practise the heart,
that would also be in the laurel...
but because to be here is much, and the transient Here
seems to need and concern us strangely. Us, the most transient.
Everyone *once*, *once* only. Just *once* and no more.
And we also *once*, Never again. But this having been
once, although only *once*, to have been of the earth,
seems irrevocable.

And so we drive ourselves and want to achieve it,
want to hold it in our simple hands,
in the surfeited gaze and in the speechless heart.
want to become it. give it to whom? Rather
keep all forever...but to the other realm,
alas, what can be taken? Not the power of seeing,
learned here so slowly, and nothing that's happened here.
Nothing. Maybe the suffering? Before all, the heaviness
and long experience of love--unutterable things.

But later, under the stars, what then? *They are better* untold of.
The wanderer does not bring a handful of earth,
the unutterable, from the mountain slope to the valley,
but a pure word he has learned, the blue
and yellow gentian. Are we *here* perhaps just to say:
house, bridge, well, gate, jug, fruit tree, window--
at most, column, tower... but to *say*, understand this, to say it
as the Things themselves never fervently thought to be.
Is it not the hidden cunning of secretive earth
when it urges on the lovers, that everything seems transfigured
in their feelings? Threshold, what is it for two lovers
that they wear away a little of their own older doorstill,
they also, after the many before,
and before those yet coming...lightly?

Here is the time for the *unutterable*, *here*, its country.
Speak and acknowledge it. More than ever
the things that we can live by are falling away,
supplanted by an action without symbol.
An action beneath crusts that easily crack, as soon as
the inner working outgrows and otherwise limits itself.
Our heart exists between hammers,
like the tongue between the teeth,
but notwithstanding, the tongue
always remains the praiser.

Praise the world to the angel, not the unutterable world;
you cannot astonish him with your glorious feelings;
in the universe, where he feels more sensitively,
you're just a beginner. Therefore, show him the simple
thing that is shaped in passing from father to son,
that lives near our hands and eyes as our very own.
Tell him about the Things. He'll stand amazed, as you stood
beside the rope-maker in Rome, or the potter on the Nile.
Show him how happy a thing can be, how blameless and ours;
how even the lamentation of sorrow purely decides
to take form, serves as a thing, or dies
in a thing, and blissfully in the beyond
escapes the violin. And these things that live,
slipping away, understand that you praise them;
transitory themselves, they trust us for rescue,
us, the most transient of all. They wish us to transmute them
in our invisible heart--oh, infinitely into us! Whoever we are.

Earth, isn't this what you want: *invisibly*
to arise in us? Is it not your dream
to be some day invisible? Earth! Invisible!
What, if not transformation, is your insistent commission?
Earth, dear one, I will! Oh, believe it needs
not one more of your springtimes to win me over.
One, just one, is already too much for my blood.
From afar I'm utterly determined to be yours.
You were always right and your sacred revelation is the intimate death.
Behold, I'm alive. On what? Neither childhood nor future
grows less...surplus of existence
is welling up in my heart.

Rainer Maria Rilke (C. F. MacIntyre, translator)