

THE NOTEBOOKS OF MALTE LAURIDS BRIGGE <sup>73</sup>

## THE PRODIGAL SON

*[Rilke's reflections in this novel on the Parable of the Prodigal deal with the fear of being loved and the way love seeks to mould a person in the expectations of the lover, which becomes an unbearable burden. One is reminded here of the work of Alice Miller on European child raising practices which refused to allow the individuality of the child to flourish: see Prisoners of Childhood, NY: Basic Books, 1981.]*

It would be difficult to persuade me that the story of the Prodigal Son is not the legend of a man who didn't want to be loved. When he was a child, everyone in the house loved him. He grew up not knowing it could be any other way and got used to their tenderness, when he was a child.

But as a boy he tried to lay aside these habits. He wouldn't have been able to say it, but when he spent the whole day roaming around outside and didn't even want to have the dogs with him, it was because they too loved him; because in their eyes he could see observation and sympathy, expectation, concern; because in their presence too he couldn't do anything without giving pleasure or pain. But what he wanted in those days was that profound indifference of heart which sometimes, early in the morning, in the fields, seized him with such purity that he had to start running, in order to have no time or breath to be more than a weightless moment in which the morning becomes conscious of itself.

The secret of that life of his which had never yet come into being, spread out before him. Involuntarily he left the footpath and went running across the fields, with outstretched arms, as if in this wide reach he would be able to master several directions at once. And then he flung himself down behind some bush and didn't matter to anyone. He peeled himself a willow flute, threw a pebble at some small animal, he leaned over and forced a beetle to turn around: none of this became fate, and the sky passed over him as over nature. Finally afternoon came with all its inspirations; you could become a buccaneer on the isle of Tortuga, and there was no obligation to be that; you could besiege Campeche, take Vera Cruz by storm; you could be a whole army or an officer on horseback or a ship on the ocean: according to the way you felt. If you thought of kneeling, right away you were Deodatus of Gozon and had slain the dragon and understood that this heroism was pure arrogance, without an obedient heart. For you didn't spare yourself anything that belonged to the game. But no matter how many scenes arose in your imagination, in between them there was always enough time to be nothing but a bird, you didn't even know what kind. Though afterward, you had to go home.

My God, how much there was then to leave behind and forget. For you really had to forget; otherwise you would betray yourself when they insisted. No matter how much you lingered and looked around, the gable always came into sight at last. The first window up there kept its eye on you; someone might be standing there. The dogs, in whom expectation had been growing all day long, ran through the hedges and drove you together into the one they recognized. And the house did the rest. Once you walked in to its full smell, most matters were already decided. A few details might still be changed; but on the whole you were already the person they thought you were; the person for whom they had long ago fashioned a life, out of his small past and their own desires; the creature belonging to them all, who stood day and night under the influence of their love, between their hope and their mistrust, before their approval or their blame.

It is useless for such a person to walk up the front steps with infinite caution. They will all be in the living room, and as soon as the door opens they will all look his way. He remains in the dark, wants to wait for their questions. But then comes the worst. They take him by the hands, lead him over to the table, and all of them, as many as are there, gather inquisitively in front of the lamp. They have the best of it; they stay in the shadows, and on him alone falls, along with the light, all the shame of having a face.

Can he stay and conform to this lying life of approximations which they have assigned to him, and come to resemble them all in every feature of his face? Can he divide himself between the delicate truthfulness of his will and the coarse deceit which corrupts it in his own eyes? Can he give up becoming

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<sup>73</sup>. Stephen Mitchell, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, pp. 107-115.

what might hurt those of his family who have nothing left but a weak heart?

No, he will go away. For example, while they are all busy setting out on his birthday table those badly guessed presents which, once again, are supposed to make up for everything. He will go away for ever. Not until long afterward would he realize how thoroughly he had decided never to love, in order not to put anyone in the terrible position of being loved. He remembered this years later and, like other good intentions, it too had proved impossible. For he had loved again and again in his solitude, each time squandering his whole nature and in unspeakable fear for the freedom of the other person. Slowly he learned to let the rays of his emotion shine through into the beloved object, instead of consuming the emotion in her. And he was pampered by the joy of recognizing, through the more and more transparent form of the beloved, the expanses that she opened to his infinite desire for possession.

Sometimes he would spend whole nights in tears, longing to be filled with such rays himself. But a woman loved, who yields, is still far from being a woman who loves. Oh nights of no consolation, which returned his flooding gifts in pieces heavy with transience. How often he thought then of the Troubadours, who feared nothing more than having their prayers answered. All the money he had acquired and increased, he gave away so as not to experience that himself. He hurt them by so grossly offering payment, more and more afraid that they might try to respond to his love. For he had lost hope of ever meeting the woman whose love could pierce him.

Even during the time when poverty terrified him every day with new hardships, when his head was the favorite toy of misery, and utterly worn ragged by it, when ulcers broke out all over his body like emergency eyes against the blackness of tribulation, when he shuddered at the filth to which he had been abandoned because he was just as foul himself: even then, when he thought about it, his greatest terror was that someone would respond to him. What were all the darknesses of that time, compared with the thick sorrow of those embraces in which everything was lost? Didn't you wake up feeling that you had no future? Didn't you walk around drained of all meaning, without the right to even the slightest danger? Didn't you have to promise, a hundred times, not to die? Perhaps it was the stubbornness of this most painful memory, which wanted to reserve a place in him to return to again and again, that allowed him, amid the dunghills, to continue living. Finally, he found his freedom again. And not until then, not until his years as a shepherd, was there any peace in his crowded past.

Who can describe what happened to him then? What poet has the eloquence to reconcile the length of those days with the brevity of life? What art is broad enough to simultaneously evoke his thin, cloaked form and the vast spaciousness of his gigantic nights?

This was the time which began with his feeling as general and anonymous as a slowly recovering convalescent. He didn't love anything, unless it could be said that he loved existing. The humble love that his sheep felt for him was no burden; like sunlight falling through clouds, it dispersed around him and softly shimmered upon the meadows. On the innocent trail of their hunger, he walked silently over the pastures of the world. Strangers saw him on the Acropolis, and perhaps for many years he was one of the shepherds in Les Baux, and saw petrified time outlast that noble family which, in spite of all their conquests under the holy numbers seven and three, could not overcome the fatal sixteen-rayed star on their own coat-of-arms. Or should I imagine him at Orange, resting against the rustic triumphal arch? Should I see him in the soul-inhabited shade of Alyscamps, where, among the tombs that lie open as the tombs of the resurrected, his glance chases a dragonfly?

It doesn't matter. I see more than him: I see his whole existence, which was then beginning its long love toward God, that silent work undertaken without thought of every reaching its goal. For though he wanted to hold himself back forever, he was now once again overcome by the growing urgency of his heart. And this time he hoped to be answered. His whole being, which during his long solitude had become prescient and imperturbable, promised him that the one he was now turning to would be capable of loving with a penetrating, radiant love. But even while he longed to be loved in so masterful a way, his emotion, which had grown accustomed to great distances, realized how extremely remote God was. There were nights when he thought he would be able to fling himself into space, toward God; hours full of disclosure, when he felt strong enough to dive back to earth and pull it up with him on the tidal wave of his heart. He was like someone who hears a glorious language and feverishly decides to write poetry in it. Before long he would, to his dismay, find out how very difficult this language was; at first he was unwilling to believe that a person might spend a whole life putting together the words of the first short meaningless exercises. He threw himself into this learning like a runner into a race; but the density of what had to be mastered slowed him down. It would be hard to imagine anything more humiliating than

his apprenticeship. He had found the philosopher's stone, and now he was being forced to ceaselessly transform the quickly produced gold of his happiness into the gross lead of patience. He, who had adapted himself to infinite space, had now become like a worm crawling through crooked passageways, without exit or direction. Now that he was learning to love, learning so laboriously and with so much pain, he could see how careless and trivial all the love had been which he thought he had achieved; how nothing could have come of it, because he had not begun to devote to it the work necessary to make it real.

During those years the great transformations were taking place inside him. He almost forgot God in the difficult work of approaching him, and all that he hoped to perhaps attain with him in time was "sa patience de supporter une âme." The accidents of fate, which most men cling to, had long ago fallen away from him; but now even the necessary pleasures and pains lost their spicy aftertaste and became pure and nourishing for him. From the roots of his being grew the sturdy evergreen plant of a fruitful joyousness. He became totally absorbed in mastering what constituted his inner life; he didn't want to omit anything, for he had no doubt that in all this his love existed and was growing. Indeed, his inward composure went so far that he decided to retrieve the most important of the experiences which he had been unable to accomplish before, those that had merely been waited through. Above all, he thought of his childhood, and the more calmly he recalled it, the more unfinished it seemed; all its memories had the vagueness of premonitions, and the fact that they were past made them almost arise as future. To take all this past upon himself once more, and this time really, was the reason why, from the midst of his estrangement, he returned home. We don't know whether he stayed there, we only know that he came back.

Those who have told the story try at this point to remind us of the house as it was then; there, only a short time has passed, a short period of counted time, everyone in the house knows exactly how much. The dogs have grown old, but they are still alive. It is reported that one of them let out a howl. All the daily tasks stop. Faces appear in the window, faces that have aged or grown up and touchingly resemble how they used to look. And in one old face, grown suddenly pale, recognition breaks through. Recognition? Is it really just recognition? --Forgiveness. Forgiveness of what? --Love. My God: it is love.

He, the one who was recognized, had no longer thought, preoccupied as he was, that love could still exist. It is easy to understand how, of everything that happened then, only this has been handed down to us: his gesture, the incredible gesture which had never been seen before, the gesture of supplication with which he threw himself at their feet, imploring them not to love. Dizzy with fright, they made him stand up, embraced him. They interpreted his outburst in their own way, forgiving him. It must have been an indescribable relief for him that, in spite of the desperate clarity of his posture, they all misunderstood him. He was probably able to stay. For every day he recognized more clearly that their love, of which they were so vain and to which they secretly encouraged one another, had nothing to do with him. He almost had to smile at their exertions, and it was obvious how little they could have him in mind.

How could they know who he was? He was now terribly difficult to love, and he felt that only One would be capable of it. But He was not yet willing. (Note that the capitalization of He was a decision of the translator.)

#### **FOR THE SAKE OF A SINGLE POEM <sup>74</sup>**

*[From the Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge. In this passage there is reflected not only Rilke's understanding of observing life and allowing it to become part of the inner landscape of one's soul, but also his experience with writing poetry as something which came into being within him, which was written through him. I value this as expressing the contribution of the experience of life to creativity and as calling for a deep respect for lived experience. All is not learned through intellect and academy.]*

... Ah, poems amount to so little when you write them too early in your life. You ought to wait and gather sense and sweetness for a whole lifetime, and a long one if possible, and then, at the very end, you might perhaps be able to write ten good lines. For poems are not, as people think, simply emotions (one has

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<sup>74</sup>. Ibid., p. 91.

emotions early enough) - they are experiences. For the sake of a single poem, you must see many cities, many people and Things, you must understand animals, must feel how birds fly, and know the gesture which small flowers make when they open in the morning. You must be able to think back to streets in unknown neighborhoods, to unexpected encounters, and to partings you had long seen coming; to days of childhood whose mystery is still unexplained, to parents whom you had to hurt when they brought in a joy and you didn't pick it up (it was a joy meant for somebody else -); to childhood illnesses that began so strangely with so many profound and difficult transformations, to days in quiet, restrained rooms and to mornings by the sea, to the sea itself, to seas, to nights of travel that rushed along high overhead and went flying with all the stars, - and it is still not enough to be able to think of all that. You must have memories of many nights of love, each one different from all the others, memories of women screaming in labor, and of light, pale, sleeping girls who have just given birth and are closing again. But you must also have been beside the dying, must have sat beside the dead in the room with the open window and the scattered noises. And it is not yet enough to have memories. You must be able to forget them when they are many, and you must have the immense patience to wait until they return. For the memories themselves are not important. Only when they have changed into our very blood, into glance and gesture, and are nameless, no longer to be distinguished from ourselves -- only then can it happen that in some very rare hour the first word of a poem arises in their midst and goes forth from them.

## UNCOLLECTED POEMS 1913-1918 <sup>75</sup>

### EXPOSED ON THE CLIFFS OF THE HEART

*[Written in 1914.]*

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 bird flies, slowly  
 circling, around the peak's pure denial. --But  
 without a shelter, here on the cliffs of the heart. . . .

### TURNING-POINT

*[Written in 1914, Rilke says, "I involuntarily called it *Wendung* [Turning], and ... it represents the turning that must come if I am to live ..." <sup>76</sup> It represents a move from "in-looking" into things to the work of the heart. A proper translation of the German of the first line is: "For a long time he attained it in in-looking." The move was caused by a resistance in creation wherein its elements denied him communion with them, his interpretation of his long period of depression and difficulty in writing following the publication of *The Notebooks*.]*

The road from intensity to greatness  
 passes through sacrifice. --Kassner

<sup>75</sup>. Ibid., pp. 143ff.

<sup>76</sup>. *Selected Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke 1902-1926*, p. 243.

For a long time he attained it in looking.  
Stars would fall to their knees  
beneath his compelling vision.  
Or as he looked on, kneeling,  
his urgency's fragrance  
tired out a god until  
it smiled at him in its sleep.

Towers he would gaze at so  
that they were terrified:  
building them up again, suddenly, in an instant!  
But how often the landscape,  
overburdened by day,  
came to rest in his silent awareness, at nightfall.

Animals trusted him, stepped  
into his open look, grazing,  
and the imprisoned lions  
stared in as if into an incomprehensible freedom;  
birds, as they felt it, flew headlong <sup>77</sup>  
through it; and flowers, as enormous  
as they are to children, gazed back  
into it, on and on.

And the rumor that there was someone  
who knew how to look,  
stirred those less  
visible creatures:  
stirred the women.

Looking how long?  
For how long now, deeply deprived,  
beseeching in the depths of his glance?  
When he, whose vocation was Waiting, sat far from home--  
the hotel's distracted unnoticing bedroom  
moody around him, and in the avoided mirror  
once more the room, and later  
from the tormenting bed  
once more:  
then in the air the voices  
discussed, beyond comprehension,  
his heart, which could still be felt;  
debated what through the painfully buried body  
could somehow be felt--his heart;  
debated and passed their judgment:  
that it did not have love.

(And denied him further communions.)

For there is a boundary to looking.  
And the world that is looked at so deeply  
wants to flourish in love.

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<sup>77</sup>. Line corrected.

Work of the eyes is done, now  
go and do heart-work  
on all the images imprisoned within you; for you  
overpowered them: but even now you don't know them.  
Learn, inner man, to look on your inner woman,  
the one attained from a thousand  
natures, the merely attained but  
not yet beloved form.

**THE VAST NIGHT**

*[Written in 1914.]*

Often I gazed at you in wonder: stood at the window begun  
 the day before, stood and gazed at you in wonder. As yet  
 the new city seemed forbidden to me, and the strange  
 unpersuadable landscape darkened as though  
 I didn't exist. Even the nearest Things  
 didn't care whether I understood them. The street  
 thrust itself up to the lamppost: I saw it was foreign.  
 Over there--a room, feelable, clear in the lamplight--,  
 I already took part; they noticed, and closed the shutters.  
 Stood. Then a child began crying. I knew what the mothers  
 all around, in the houses, were capable of--, and knew  
 the inconsolable origins of all tears.  
 Or a woman's voice sang and reached a little beyond  
 expectation, or downstairs an old man let out  
 a cough that was full of reproach, as though his body were right  
 and the gentler world mistaken. And then the hour  
 struck--, but I counted too late, it tumbled on past me.--  
 Like a new boy at school, who is finally allowed to join in,  
 but he can't catch the ball, is helpless at all the games  
 the others pursue with such ease, and he stands there staring  
 into the distance,--where--?: I stood there and suddenly  
 grasped that it was you: *you* were playing with me, grown-up  
 Night, and I gazed at you in wonder. Where the towers  
 were raging, where with averted fate  
 a city surrounded me, and indecipherable mountains  
 camped against me, and strangeness, in narrowing circles,  
 prowled around my randomly flickering emotions--:  
 it was then that in all your magnificence  
 you were not ashamed to know me. Your breath moved tenderly  
 over my face. And, spread across solemn distances,  
 your smile entered my heart.

**THE DUINO ELEGIES** <sup>78</sup>

*[The Elegies Rilke considered his masterpiece. Because they came to him as revelation, there are obscurities with which the author could not even help us. They should be read, perhaps aloud, and experienced rather than analyzed.]*

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<sup>78</sup>. Ibid., pp.151ff.

**THE THIRD ELEGY**

*[Rilke knew Freud, and his close friend and one time lover, Lou Andreas-Salome, became one of the first to be trained by Freud as a psychoanalyst. However, his description of what is in a person sounds more like Jung's Collective Unconscious, but I know of no connection with Jung. His appreciation of the dynamics out of which a person acts are striking.]*

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 sooth 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 star,  
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 the 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 .....

## THE SEVENTH ELEGY

*[A year before his death Rilke wrote to his Polish translator:*

Affirmation of *life-AND-death* turns out to be one in the Elegies. .... We of the here-and-now are not for a moment satisfied in the world of time, nor are we bound in it; we are continually overflowing toward those who preceded us, toward our origin, and toward those who seemingly come after us. In the vast "open" world, all beings *are* -- one cannot say "contemporaneous," for the very fact that time has ceased determines that they all *are*. Everywhere transience is plunging into the depths of Being. ... It is our task to imprint this temporary, perishable earth into ourselves so deeply, so painfully and passionately, that its essence can rise again, "invisibly," inside us. We are the bees of the invisible. We wildly collect the honey of the visible, to store it in the great golden hive of the invisible. The Elegies show us at this work, the work of the continual conversion of the beloved visible and tangible world into the invisible vibrations and agitation of our own nature ... Elegies and Sonnets support each other constantly --, and I consider it

an infinite grace that, with the same breath, I was permitted to fill both these sails: the little rust-colored sail of the Sonnets and the Elegies' gigantic white canvas. (*Here he speaks also of his Sonnets to Orpheus, written at the same time as the Elegies.*)<sup>79</sup>

*In regards to the image of the bird Rilke explains:*

The bird is a creature that has a very special feeling of trust in the external world, as if she knew that she is one with its deepest mystery. That is why she sings in it as if she were singing within her own depths; that is why we so easily receive a birdcall into our own depths; we seem to be translating it without residue into our emotion; indeed, it can for a moment turn the whole world into inner space, because we feel that the bird does not distinguish between her heart and the world's.<sup>80</sup>

Not wooing, no longer shall wooing, voice that has outgrown it,  
 be the nature of your cry; but instead, you would cry out as purely as a bird  
 when the quickly ascending season lifts him up, nearly forgetting  
 that he is a suffering creature and not just a single heart  
 being flung into brightness, into the intimate skies. Just like him  
 you would be wooing, not any less purely--, so that, still  
 unseen, she would sense you, the silent lover in whom a reply  
 slowly awakens and, as she hears you, grows warm,--  
 the ardent companion to your own most daring emotion.

Oh and springtime would hold it--, everywhere it would echo  
 the song of annunciation. First the small  
 questioning notes intensified all around  
 by the sheltering silence of a pure, affirmative day.  
 Then up the stairs, up the stairway of calls, to the dreamed-of  
 temple of the future--; and then the trill, like a fountain  
 which, in its rising jet, already anticipates its fall  
 in a game of promises. . . . And still ahead: summer.

Not only all the dawns of summer--, not only  
 how they change themselves into day and shine with beginning.  
 Not only the days, so tender around flowers and, above,  
 around the patterned treetops, so strong, so intense.  
 Not only the reverence of all these unfolded powers,  
 not only the pathways, not only the meadows at sunset,  
 not only, after a late storm, the deep-breathing freshness,  
 not only approaching sleep, and a premonition . . .  
 but also the nights! But also the lofty summer  
 nights, and the stars as well, the stars of the earth.  
 Oh to be dead at last and know them endlessly,  
 all the stars: for how, how could we ever forget them!

Look, I was calling for my lover. But not just *she*  
 would come . . . Out of their fragile graves  
 girls would arise and gather . . . For how could I limit  
 the call, once I called it? These unripe spirits keep seeking  
 the earth. --Children, one earthly Thing  
 truly experienced, even once, is enough for a lifetime.  
 Don't think that fate is more than the density of childhood;

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<sup>79</sup>. Ibid., p. 316.

<sup>80</sup>. Ibid., p. 327.

how often you outdistanced the man you loved, breathing, breathing  
after the blissful chase, and passed on into freedom.

*Truly* being here is glorious. Even *you* knew it,  
you girls who seemed to be lost, to go under--, in the filthiest  
streets of the city, festering there, or wide open  
for garbage. For each of you had an hour, or perhaps  
not even an hour, a barely measurable time  
between two moments--, when you were granted a sense  
of being. Everything. Your veins flowed with being.  
But we can so easily forget what our laughing neighbor  
neither confirms nor envies. We want to display it,  
to make it visible, though even the most visible happiness  
can't reveal itself to us until we transform it, within.

Nowhere, Beloved, will world be but within us. Our life  
passes in transformation. And the external  
shrinks into less and less. Where once an enduring house was,  
now a cerebral structure crosses our path, completely  
belonging to the realm of concepts, as though it still stood in the brain.  
Our age has built itself vast reservoirs of power,  
formless as the straining energy that it wrests from the earth.  
Temples are no longer known. It is we who secretly save up  
these extravagances of the heart. Where one of them still survives,  
a Thing that was formerly prayed to, worshipped, knelt before--  
just as it is, it passes into the invisible world.  
Many no longer perceive it, yet miss the chance  
to build it *inside* themselves now, with pillars and statues: greater.

Each torpid turn of the world has such disinherited ones,  
to whom neither the past belongs, nor yet what has nearly arrived.  
For even the nearest moment is far from mankind. Though *we*  
should not be confused by this, but strengthened in our task of preserving  
the still-recognizable form.-- This once *stood* among mankind,  
in the midst of Fate the annihilator, in the midst  
of Not-Knowing-Whither, it stood as if enduring, and bent  
stars down to it from their safeguarded heavens. Angel,  
to *you* I will show it, *there!* in your endless vision  
it shall stand, now finally upright, rescued at last.  
Pillars, pylons, the Sphinx, the striving thrust  
of the cathedral, gray, from a fading or alien city.

Wasn't all this a miracle? Be astonished, Angel, for we  
*are* this, O Great One; proclaim that we could achieve this, my breath  
is too short for such praise. So, after all, we have not  
failed to make use of these generous spaces, these  
spaces of *ours*. (How frighteningly great they must be,  
since thousands of years have not made them overflow with our feelings.)  
But a tower was great, wasn't it? Oh Angel, it was--  
even when placed beside you? Chartres was great--, and music  
reached still higher and passed far beyond us. But even  
a woman in love--, oh alone at night by her window. . . .  
didn't she reach your knee--?

Don't think that I'm wooing.  
Angel, and even if I were, you would not come. For my call

is always filled with departure; against such a powerful current you cannot move. Like an outstretched arm is my call. And its hand, held open and reaching up to seize, remains in front of you, open as if in defense and warning, Ungraspable One, far above.

### THE NINTH ELEGY

[Here Rilke reflects on the reason for human existence: "truly being here is so much; because everything here apparently needs us" to name its existence, to praise it, to witness to it though it is transient.]

Why, if this interval of being can be spent serenely in the form of a laurel, slightly darker than all other green with tiny waves on the edges of every leaf (like the smile of a breeze)--: why then have to be human--and, escaping from fate, keep longing for fate? . . .

Oh *not* because happiness *exists*,  
that too-hasty profit snatched from approaching loss.  
Not out of curiosity, not as practice for the heart, which  
would exist in the laurel too. . . .

But because *truly* being here is so much; because everything here apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all. *Once* for each thing. Just once; no more. And we too, just once. And never again. But to have been this once, completely, even if only once: to have been at one with the earth, seems beyond undoing.

And so we keep pressing on, trying to achieve it, trying to hold it firmly in our simple hands, in our overcrowded gaze, in our speechless heart. Trying to become it.--Whom can we give it to? We would hold on to it all, forever . . . Ah, but what can we take along into that other realm? Not the art of looking, which is learned so slowly, and nothing that happened here. Nothing. The sufferings, then. And, above all, the heaviness, and the long experience of love,--just what is wholly unsayable. But later, among the stars, what good is it--*they* are *better* as they are: unsayable. For when the traveler returns from the mountain-slopes into the valley, he brings, not a handful of earth, unsayable to others, but instead some word he has gained, some pure word, the yellow and blue gentian. Perhaps we are *here* in order to say: house, bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window--at most: column, tower. . . . But to *say* them, you must understand, oh to say them *more* intensely than the Things themselves ever dreamed of existing. Isn't the secret intent of this taciturn earth, when it forces lovers together, that inside their boundless emotion all things may shudder with joy? Threshold: what it means for two lovers to be wearing down, imperceptibly, the ancient threshold of their door--

They too, after the many who came before them  
and before those to come. . . ., lightly.

*Here* is the time for the *sayable*, here is its homeland.  
Speak and bear witness. More than ever  
the Things that we might experience are vanishing, for  
what crowds them out and replaces them is an imageless act.  
An act under a shell, which easily cracks open as soon as  
the business inside outgrows it and seeks new limits.  
Between the hammers our heart  
endures, just as the tongue does  
between the teeth and, despite that,  
still is able to praise.

Praise this world to the angel, not the unsayable one.  
you can't impress *him* with glorious emotion; in the universe  
where he feels more powerfully, you are a novice. So show him  
something simple which, formed over generations,  
lives as our own, near our hand and within our gaze.  
Tell him of Things. He will stand astonished; as *you* stood  
by the rope-maker in Rome or the potter along the Nile.  
Show him how happy a Thing can be, how innocent and ours,  
how even lamenting grief purely decides to take form,  
serves as a Thing, or dies into a Thing--, and blissfully  
escapes far beyond the violin.--And these Things,  
which live by perishing, know you are praising them; transient,  
they look to us for deliverance: us, the most transient of all.  
They want us to change them, utterly, in our invisible heart,  
within--oh endlessly--within us! Whoever we may be at last.

Earth, isn't this what you want: to arise within us,  
*invisible*? Isn't it your dream  
to be wholly invisible someday?--O Earth: invisible!  
What, if not transformation, is your urgent command?  
Earth, my dearest, I will. Oh believe me, you no longer  
need your springtimes to win me over--one of them,  
ah, even one, is already too much for my blood.  
Unspeakably I have belonged to you, from the first.  
You were always right, and your holiest inspiration  
is our intimate companion, Death.

Look, I am living. On what? Neither childhood nor future  
grows any smaller. . . . Superabundant being  
wells up in my heart.

### THE TENTH ELEGY

*[Rilke speaks of how we squander our hours of grief and suffering and how we avoid dealing with death. One who died young is then guided into the land of grief by a Lament.]*

Someday, emerging at last from the violent insight,  
let me sing out jubilation and praise to assenting angels.  
Let not even one of the clearly-struck hammers of my heart  
fail to sound because of a slack, a doubtful,  
or a broken string. Let my joyfully streaming face

make me more radiant; let my hidden weeping arise  
and blossom. How dear you will be to me then, you nights  
of anguish. Why didn't I kneel more deeply to accept you,  
inconsolable sisters, and, surrendering, lose myself  
in your loosened hair. How we squander our hours of pain.  
How we gaze beyond them into the bitter duration  
to see if they have an end. Though they are really  
our winter-enduring foliage, our dark evergreen,  
*one* season in our inner year--, not only a season  
in time--, but are place and settlement, foundation and soil and home.

But how alien, alas, are the streets of the city of grief,  
where, in the false silence formed of continual uproar,  
the figure cast from the mold of emptiness stoutly  
swaggers: the gilded noise, the bursting memorial.  
Oh how completely an angel would stamp out their market of solace,  
bounded by the church with its ready-made consolations:  
clean and disenchanting and shut as a post-office on Sunday.  
Farther out, though, the city's edges are curling with carnival.  
Swings of freedom! Divers and jugglers of zeal!  
And the shooting-gallery's targets of prettified happiness,  
which jump and kick back with a tinny sound  
when hit by some better marksman. From cheers to chance  
he goes staggering on, as booths with all sorts of attractions  
are wooing, drumming, and bawling. For adults only  
there is something special to see: how money multiplies, naked,  
right there on stage, money's genitals, nothing concealed,  
the whole action--, educational, and guaranteed  
to increase your potency . . . . .  
. . . . Oh, but a little farther,  
beyond the last of the billboards, plastered with signs for "Deathless,"  
that bitter beer which seems so sweet to its drinkers  
as long as they chew fresh distractions in between sips . . . ,  
just in back of the billboard, just behind, the view becomes *real*.  
Children are playing, and lovers are holding hands, to the side,  
solemnly in the meager grass, and dogs are doing what is natural.  
The young man is drawn on, farther; perhaps he is in love with a young  
Lament . . . . He comes out behind her, into the meadows. She says:  
--It's a long walk. We live way out there . . . .  
Where? And the youth  
follows. He is touched by her manner. Her shoulders, her neck--, perhaps  
she is of noble decent. But he leaves her, turns around,  
looks back, waves . . . What's the use? She is a Lament

Only those who died young, in their first condition  
of timeless equanimity, while they are being weaned,  
follow her lovingly. She waits  
for girls and befriends them. Shows them, gently,  
what she is wearing. Pearls of grief and the fine-spun  
veils of patience.--With young men she walks  
in silence.

But there, in the valley, where they live, one of the elder Laments  
answers the youth when he questions her:-- Long ago,  
she says, we Laments were a powerful race. Our forefathers worked

the mines, up there in the mountain-range; sometimes even  
among men you can find a polished nugget of primal grief  
or a chunk of petrified rage from the slag of an ancient volcano.  
Yes, that came from up there. We used to be rich.--

And gently she guides him through the vast landscape of Lament,  
shows him the pillars of the temples, and the ruined walls  
of those castles from which, long ago, the princes of Lament  
wisely ruled the land. Shows him the tall  
trees of tears and the fields of blossoming grief  
(the living know it just as a mild green shrub);  
shows him the herds of sorrow, grazing,--and sometimes  
a startled bird, flying low through their upward gaze,  
far away traces the image of its solitary cry.--  
In the twilight she leads him out to the graves of the elders  
who gave warning to the race of Laments, the sibyls and prophets.  
But as night approaches, they move more softly, and soon  
the sepulchre rises up  
like a moon, watching over everything. Brother to the one on the Nile,  
the lofty Sphinx--: the taciturn chamber's  
countenance.  
And they look in wonder at the regal head that has silently  
lifted the human face  
to the scale of the stars forever

Still dizzy from recent death, his sight  
cannot grasp it. But her gaze  
frightens an owl from behind the rim of the crown. And the bird,  
with slow downstrokes, brushes along the cheek,  
the one with the fuller curve,  
and faintly, in the dead youth's new  
sense of hearing, as upon a double  
unfolded page, it sketches the indescribable outline.

And higher, the stars. The new stars of the land of grief.  
Slowly the Lament names them:--Look, there;  
the *Rider*, the *Staff*, and the larger constellation  
called *Garland of Fruit*. Then, farther up toward the Pole:  
*Cradle; Path; The Burning Book; Puppet; Window*.  
But there, in the southern sky, pure as the lines  
on the palm of a blessed hand, the clear sparkling *M*  
that stands for Mothers . . . . . --

But the dead youth must go on by himself, and silently the elder Lament  
takes him as far as the ravine,  
where shimmering in the moonlight  
is the fountainhead of joy. With reverence  
she names it and says: --Among men  
it is a mighty stream.--

They stand at the foot of the mountain-range.  
And she embraces him, weeping.  
Alone, he climbs on, up the mountains of primal grief.  
And not once do his footsteps echo from the soundless path.

\*

But if the endlessly dead awakened a symbol in us,  
perhaps they would point to the catkins hanging from the bare  
branches of the hazel-trees, or  
would evoke the raindrops that fall onto the dark earth in springtime.--

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

## UNCOLLECTED POEMS, 1923-1926 <sup>81</sup>

[ *These poems were written during the last years of his life.* ]

### **AN IMAGE OF LIFE'S JOURNEY**

[*Schöneck, September 15, 1923*]

First a childhood, limitless and without  
denial and goal. O joy unawares.  
Suddenly terror, limits, school, slavery  
and plunge into temptation and loss.

Defiance. The bent becomes himself the bender  
and inflicts on others that he survived.  
Loved, feared, saviour, struggler, victor  
and conqueror, blow by blow.

And now alone in vast, empty, cold space.  
Yet deep in the grown-up form  
A breath stirs from ancient times ...

Then from his ambush God leapt.

### **AS ONCE WINGED DELIGHT**

[*Muzot, February 1924*]

As once winged delight  
lifted you o'er many a former abyss,  
build now bridges not yet conceived,  
a bold and calculated venture.

Wonder's not only in the unexplained  
overcoming of danger;  
only in a clearly intended  
achievement does wonder become wonderful.

---

<sup>81</sup>. Translations by myself.



To affect life's course cannot be presumed  
when the process can't be described  
and the pattern becomes continually more intricate,  
only -- to be swept along is not enough.

Stretch your practiced powers  
until they reach between two  
contradictions ... For in humanity  
God wills to be disclosed.

### **WHAT BIRDS PLUNGE THROUGH**

[Muzot, June 16, 1924]

What birds plunge through is not the  
trusted space which enhances forms.  
(In the open, there, *you* are denied  
and diminish without recourse.)

Space reaches from us and construes things:  
so that for you the existence of a tree might succeed,  
throw inner space around it, from that space  
which exists within you. Surround space with restraint.  
It does not limit itself. Only in the formative power  
of your renouncing does it become truly tree.