

RAINER MARIA RILKE

From *The Duino Elegies*

The First Elegy

Who, if I cried out, would ever hear me among the angels
and archangels? And even if one of them did suddenly
crush me against his chest, I would disappear, undone
by the greater strength of his being. For the beautiful is nothing other
than an onset of terror we just barely withstand,
and we're struck with wonder at how calmly it disdains
to destroy us. Every one of the angels terrifies.

So I stand up straight, swallow, and choke back the bird-summons
that my twilight sobbing became. Oh, but who could be
expected to fill our needs? Not angels, not people,
and the alerter animals have already noticed
that we are not dependably at home
in the world as it's been construed. Perhaps there remains for us
a tree somewhere on a hillside, one we daily see;
streets from bygone eras remain,
and the inapt fealty of a habit that so liked
living with us, it remained and never left.

Oh, and Night, Night, when a wind filled with the cosmos
browses one's face—, for whom would it not remain, longed-for,
mildly disappointing, an arduous prospect
for the heart in solitude. Does it rest more lightly on lovers?
Alas, they only use each other as a screen to conceal their fate.

Do you *still* not understand? Let your arms fling absences
outward to the space we breathe in; it may well be that birds
will meet the ampler air with a flight even more heartfelt.

Yes, those early springs did need you. How many stars
have urged you to become aware of them. A wave
from long ago rose up towards you, or,
as you approached an opened window,
a violin gave itself up to you. All this was your mission.
But were you equal to it? Weren't you constantly
distracted by anticipation, as though everything
foretold a new beloved? (What refuge can you
offer her, while all those vast, alien thoughts stray

in and out, at times staying overnight.) Still, if yearning should come, then sing of lovers; their renowned passion is not even close to being immortal enough. The forsaken—you almost envy them—proved to be much more loving than the requited. Reach again and again toward the never fully attained goal of proclaiming their worth. Reflect: the hero always continues on, even his dying proved to be only a brief illusion: a last rebirth. But lovers are reabsorbed by depleted Nature as though her energies could never manage to form them a second time. Have you done all you could to commemorate Gaspara Stampa, so that any young woman abandoned by her lover, when contemplating the high example of this passionate person, will feel: let me become what she was? Shouldn't these, our oldest torments, at last become more fruitful? Isn't it time for us, though still loving, to free ourselves from the beloved, and, trembling, stand firm: as an arrow stands firm on the string, and, mustered into the rebound, becomes more than itself. For standing still is being nowhere.

Voices, voices. Listen, heart, as before now only the saints have listened: thus the immense summons lifted them from the ground; but continuing to kneel, these more than human beings never noticed: that *was* their listening. Not that you could withstand the voice of God, far from. But hear the blowing wind, as its uninterrupted message develops out of silence. It whispers to you now from those who died young. Wherever you visited a church, at Rome or Naples, didn't their destiny serenely speak to you? Or an inscription accord you its elevated relief as one recently did on that tomb in Santa Maria Formosa? What is it those dead ask of me? That I gently dispel any implication of their being wronged, which sometimes hinders, a little, their spirits' limpid motion.

Granted, it's strange no longer to live on Earth, no more to practice customs only recently acquired, not lending to roses and other things strikingly auspicious a meaning for our human future; no more to be held in relentlessly anxious hands, as you once were, and even your own name—to let it drop like a broken toy. Strange not to wish any further wishes. Strange to see all that was once interlocked fly apart and scatter through space. And being dead is hard work, handling a few remaining chores, so that we may at last

taste eternity. But the living all make the same mistake: they draw too sharp a distinction. Angels (we're told) often didn't know whether they were walking among the living or the dead. The eternal current flowing through the two domains forever sweeps along with it all ages, which its onrush drowns out in both.

Finally, they no longer need us, those spirited away early; they quietly wean themselves from the habit of earthly things, much as one outgrows the mother's tender breast. But we who need great mysteries, we, whose grieving is so often the source of imaginative gains—: could we truly live without them? Is that legend no help, telling how once during the lament for Linos a daring primal music cut through thickened apathy; and a youth near to being a god suddenly and forever stepped away from bewildered space, an absence turning into that humming that sweeps us on, comforts, and supports.

[Translated from the German by Alfred Corn]

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