

RAINER MARIA RILKE

Duino Elegy 1

translated by Alison Croggon

Who, when I cry, hears me among the angelic orders? and even supposing one of them seized me suddenly to his heart: I vanish in his violent presence. Then beauty is nothing but this terrifying beginning, which yet we astonishingly endure, and we admire it so, because it calmly disdains to destroy us. Each single angel is terrible. And so I restrain myself and choke this birdcall in darkening sobs. Ach, who then is able to our need? Not angels, not men, and the clever animals understand well that we are not trustingly at home in our imagined world. There remains for us perhaps some tree on a slope that from day to day we re-encounter; there remain yesterday's streets and that distorted true-self or habit which kissed us with pleasure and so remained. O and the night, the night, when the wind full of worldspace consumes our faces – where does she not remain, this longing, soft disillusioner, whom solitary hearts laboriously approach? Is she lighter for lovers? Ach, with each other they only conceal their lot. Don't you know yet? Fling the void from your arms towards this freedom, where we breathe: perhaps as birds sense the expanding air with more ardent flight.

Yes, the spring needed you. It petitioned many a star to you, so you might trace it. It lifted itself as a wave out of the past, or maybe there as you passed an opened window a violin gave itself. That was all a duty. But were you overpowered? Were you not always distracted by expectation, as if it announced a nearby lover? (How could you hold her when the vast strange thoughts within you wink in and out and often stay with night.)

Yet it desires you; so sing the lovers: their renowned feelings are far from immortal enough. Those, you envied them almost, abandoned, whom you discovered so much more loving than the required: perpetually begin their unattainable praise; think: the hero survives, his foundered self merely a pretext to being, his ultimate birth. But lovers are grasped by exhausted nature back to herself, as if such strength could not flare twice. Have you said enough of Gaspara Stampa, that any woman whose lover escaped her should feel this love for her stronger example: if I could be like her? Shouldn't at last these oldest sufferings bear more fruit? Is it not time that in loving we freed ourselves from the lover and tremulously endured: as the arrow endures the string, gathering in the leaping off to a being more than self? For remaining is nowhere.

Voices, voices. Hear, my heart, how otherwise only the holy hear: so when the immense cry lifted them up from the ground, they kept kneeling, impossibly, more deeply attentive: such was their listening. Not that you could endure the voice of God, even remotely. But hear the waves, the ceaseless communication shaped out of silence. It rushes now from the young dead towards you. Where did you always enter, speechless in churches of Rome and Naples, their destiny silent upon you? Or it sublimely bore you an inscription as recently the plaque in Santa Maria Formosa. What does it want of me? Gently I must remove this false appearance, which sometimes slightly impedes the pure motion of its spirits.

Certainly, it's strange to inhabit the earth no longer,
discarding scarcely learnt customs, no longer using
roses and other expressly promised things
to give the future a human meaning,
to be no more whatever one was
in endlessly anxious hands, and even to leave one's name
behind like a shattered toy.
Strange, the wish to wish no longer. Strange
to see all it covered fluttering
so loosely in space. And this being dead is painful
and full of retrieving, as one gradually sees
a little eternity. – But the living are all mistaken,
marking divisions so certainly.
Angels (they say) often don't know if they pass
over or under the living or the dead. The endless torrent
tears all ages through both spheres
always and in both sounds over them.

Finally they need us no more, the early departed,
they wean themselves gently from earth, as one outgrows
the mild breasts of a mother. But we, who so desire
vast mysteries, whose grief so often
springs in blissful progress: can we exist without them?
Is the myth pointless, how once, in the mourning for Linos,
music's first wager broke the nerveless drought,
and how the terrified space, which an almost godlike boy
suddenly entered forever, first struck in the void
that other vibration, which now overwhelms us,
and comforts, and helps.