

# The Duino Elegies

Rainer Maria Rilke  
(1912-1922)

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*The Duino Elegies*

# The First Elegy

(by Rainer Maria Rilke)

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Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic Orders? And even if one of them suddenly pressed me against his heart, I should fade in the strength of his stronger existence. For Beauty's nothing but beginning of Terror we're still just able to bear, and why we adore it so is because it serenely disdains to destroy us. Each single angel is terrible. And so I keep down my heart, and swallow the call-note of depth-dark sobbing. Alas, who is there we can make use of? Not angels, not men; and already the knowing brutes are aware that we don't feel very securely at home within our interpreted world. There remains, perhaps, some tree on a slope, to be looked at day after day, there remains for us yesterday's walk and the cupboard-love loyalty of a habit that liked us and stayed and never gave notice. Oh, and there's Night, there's Night, when wind full of cosmic space feeds on our faces: for whom would she not remain, longed for, mild disenchantress, painfully there for the lonely heart to achieve? Is she lighter for her lovers? Alas, with each other they only conceal their lot! Don't you know *yet?*—Fling the emptiness out of your arms into the spaces we breathe—maybe that the birds will feel the extended air in more intimate flight.

Yes, the Springs had need of you. Many a star was waiting for you to spy it. Many a wave would rise on the past towards you; or, else, perhaps, as you went by an open window, a violin would be giving itself to someone. All this was a trust. But were you equal to it? Were you not always distracted by expectation, as though all this where announcing someone to love? (As if you could hope to conceal her, with all those great strange thoughts going in and out and often staying overnight!) No, when longing comes over you, sing the great lovers: the fame of all they can feel is far from immortal enough. Those whom you almost envied, those forsaken, you found so far beyond the requited in loving. Begin ever anew their never attainable praise. Consider: the Hero continues, even his fall was a pretext for further existence, an ultimate birth. But lovers are taken back by exhausted Nature into herself, as though such creative force could never be re-exerted. Have you so fully remembered Gaspara Stampa, that any girl, whose beloved's eluded her, may feel, from that far intenser example of loving: "if I could become like her!"? Ought not these oldest sufferings of ours to be yielding more fruit by now? Is it not time that, in loving,

we freed ourselves from the loved one, and, quivering, endured: as the arrow endures the string, to become, in the gathering out-leap, something more than itself? For staying is nowhere.

Voices, voices. Hear, O my heart, as only saints have heard; heard till the giant-call lifted them off the ground; yet they went impossibly on with their kneeling, in undistracted attention: so inherently hearers. Not that you could endure the voice of God—far from it. But hark to the suspiration, the uninterrupted news that grows out of silence. Rustling towards you now from those youthfully-dead. Whenever you entered a church in Rome or in Naples were you not always being quietly addressed by their fate? Or else an inscription sublimely imposed itself on you, as, lately, the tablet in Santa Maria Formosa. What they require of me? I must gently remove the appearance of suffered injustice, that hinders a little, at times, their purely-proceeding spirits.

True, it is strange to inhabit the earth no longer, to use no longer customs scarcely acquired, not to interpret roses, and other things that promise so much, in terms of human future; to be no longer all that one used to be in endlessly anxious hands, and to lay aside even one's proper name like a broken toy. Strange, not to go on wishing one's wishes. Strange, to see all that was once relation so loosely fluttering hither and thither in space. And it's hard, being dead, and full of retrieving before one begins to spy a trace of eternity.—Yes, but all of the living make the mistake of drawing to sharp distinctions. Angels, (they say) are often unable to tell whether they move among the living or the dead. the eternal torrent whirls all the ages through either realm for ever, and sounds above their voices in both.

They've finally no more need of us, the early-departed, one's gently weaned from terrestrial things as one mildly outgrows the breasts of a mother. But we, that have need of such mighty secrets, we, for whom sorrow's so often source of blesseddest progress, could we exist without them? Is the story in vain, how once, in the mourning for Linos, venturing earliest music pierced barren numbness, and how, in the horrified space an almost deified youth suddenly quitted for ever, emptiness first felt the vibration that now charms us and comforts and helps?

(translated from German by J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender)

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*The Duino Elegies*

# The Second Elegy

(by Rainer Maria Rilke)

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Every Angel is terrible. Still, though, alas!  
I invoke you, almost deadly birdst of the soul,  
knowing what you are. Oh, where are the days of Tobias,  
when one of the shining-most stood on the simple threshold,  
a little disguised for the journey, no longer appalling,  
(a youth to the youth as he curiously peered outside).  
Let the archangel perilous now, from behind the stars,  
step but a step down hitherwards: high up-beating,  
our heart would out-beat us. Who are you?

Early successes, Creation's pampered darlings,  
ranges, summits, dawn-red ridges  
of all beginning,—pollen of blossoming godhead,  
hinges of light, corridors, stairways, thrones,  
spaces of being, shields of felicity, tumults  
of stormily-rapturous feeling, and suddenly, separate,  
mirrors, drawing up their own  
outstreamed beauty into their faces again.

For we, when we feel, evaporate; oh, we  
breathe ourselves out and away; from ember to ember  
yielding a fainter scent. True, someone may tell us:  
'You've got in my blood, the room, the Spring's  
growing full of you'. . . What's the use? He cannot retain us.  
We vanish within and around him. And those that have beauty,  
oh, who shall hold them back? Incessant appearance  
comes and goes in their faces. Like dew from the morning grass  
exhales from us that which is ours, like heat  
from a smoking dish. O smile, whither? O upturned glance:  
new, warm, vanishing wave of the heart—alas,  
but we *are* all that. Does the cosmic space  
we dissolve into taste of us, then? Do the angels really  
only catch up what is theirs, what has streamed from them, or at  
times,  
as though through an oversight, is a little of our  
existence in them as well? Is there just so much of us  
mixed with their features as that vague look in the faces  
of pregnant women? Unmarked by them in their whirling  
return to themselves. (How should they remark it?)

Lovers, if Angels could understand them, might utter  
strange things in the midnight air. For it seems that everything's  
trying to hide us. Look, the trees exist; the houses  
we live in still stand where they were. We only  
pass everything by like a transposition of air.

And all combines to suppress us, partly as shame,  
perhaps, and partly as inexpressible hope.

Lovers, to you, each satisfied in the other,  
I turn with my question about us. You grasp yourselves. Have you  
proofs?

Look, with me it may happen at times that my hands  
grow aware of each other, or else that my hard-worn face  
seeks refuge within them. That gives me a little  
sensation. But who, just for that, could presume to exist?  
You, though, that go on growing  
in the other's rapture till, overwhelmed, he implores  
'No more'; you that under each other's hands  
grow more abundant like vintage grapes;  
sinking at times, but only because the other  
has to completely emerged; I ask you about us. I know  
why you so blissfully touch: because he caress persists,  
because it does not vanish, the place that you  
so tenderly cover; because you perceive thereunder  
pure duration. Until your embraces almost  
promise eternity. Yet, when you've once withstood  
the startled first encounter, the window-longing,  
and that first walk, just once, through the garden together:  
Lovers, are you the same? When you lift yourselves  
up to each other's lips—dring unto drink:  
oh, how strangely the drinker eludes his part!

On Attic stelés, did not the circumspection  
of human gesture amazing? Were no love and farewell  
so lightly laid upon shoulders, they seemed to be made  
of other stuff than with us? Remember the hands,  
how they rest without pressure, though power is there in the  
torsos.

The wisdom of those self-masters was this: we have got so far;  
ours is to touch one another like this; the gods  
may press more strongly upon us. But that is the gods' affair.  
If only we could discover some pure, contained,  
narrow, human, own little strip of orchard  
in between river and rock! For our heart transcends us  
just as it did those others. And we can no longer  
gaze after it into figures that soothe it, or godlike  
bodies, wherein it achieves a grander restraint.

(translated from German by J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender)

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The Duino Elegies

The Third Elegy

(by Rainer Maria Rilke)

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One thing to sing the beloved, another, alas!  
that hidden guilty river-god of the blood.  
He whom she knows from afar, her lover, what does he know  
of that Lord of Pleasure, who often, out of his lonely heart,  
before she had soothed him, often as though she did not exist,  
streaming from, oh, what unknowable depths, would uplift  
his god-head, uprousing the night to infinite uproar?  
Oh, the Neptune within our blood, oh, his terrible trident!  
Oh, the gloomy blast of his breast from the twisted shell!  
Hark, how the night grows fluted and hollowed. You stars,  
is it not from you that the lover's delight in the loved one's  
face arises? Does not his intimate insight  
into her purest face come from the purest stars?

It was not you, alas! It was not his mother  
that bent his brows into such an expectant arch.  
Not to meet yours, girl feeling him, not to meet yours  
did his lips begin to assume that more fruitful curve.  
Do you really suppose your gentle approach could have so  
convulsed him, you, that wander like morning-breezes?  
You terrified his heart, indeed; but more ancient terrors  
rushed into him in that instant of shattering contact.  
Call him . . . you can't quite call him away from those sombre  
companions.  
Truly, he tries to, he does escape them; disburdenedly settles  
into your intimate heart, receives and begins himself there.  
Did he ever begin himself, though?  
Mother, you made him small, it was you that began him;  
he was new to you, you arched over those new eyes  
the friendly world, averting the one that was strange.  
Where, oh where, are the years when you simply displaced  
for him, with your slender figure, the surging abyss?  
You hid so much from him then; made the nightly-suspected room  
harmless, and out of your heart full of refuge  
mingled more human space with that of his nights.  
Not in the darkness, no, but within your far nearer presence  
you placed the light, and it shone as though out of friendship.  
Nowhere a creak you could not explain with a smile,  
as though you had long known *when* the floor would behave itself  
thus. . .  
And he listened to you and was soothed. So much it availed,  
gently, your coming; his tall cloaked destiny stepped  
behind the chest of drawers, and his restless future,  
that easily got out of place, conformed to the folds of the curtain.

And he himself as he lay there in such relief,  
mingling, under his drowsy eyelids, the sweetness  
of your light shaping with the foretaste of coming sleep,

seemed to be under protection . . . Within, though: who could avert,  
divert, the floods of origin flowing within him?  
Alas! there *was* no caution within that sleeper; sleeping,  
yes, but dreaming, yes, but feverish: what he embarked on!  
He, so new, so timorous, how he got tangled  
in ever-encroaching roots of inner event,  
twisted to primitive patterns, to throttling growths, to bestial  
preying forms! How he gave himself up to it! Loved.  
Loved his interior world, his interior jungle,  
that primal forest within, on whose mute overthrownness,  
green-lit, his heart stood. Loved. Left it, continued  
into his own roots and out into violent beginning  
where his tiny birth was already outlived. Descended,  
lovingly, into the older blood, the ravines  
where Frightfulness lurked, still gorged with his fathers. And every  
terror knew him, and winked, and quite understood.  
Yes, Horror smiled at him . . . Seldom  
did you, Mother, smile so tenderly. How could he help  
loving what smiled at him? Long before you  
he loved it, for, even while you bore him,  
it was there, dissolved in the water that lightens the seed.

Look, we don't love like flowers, with only a single  
season behind us; immemorial sap  
mounts in our arms when we love. Oh, maid,  
*this*: that we've loved, *within*, not one, still to come, but all  
the innumerable fermentation; not just a single child,  
but the fathers, resting like mountain-ruins  
within our depths;—but the dry river-bed  
of former mothers;—yes, and the whole of that  
soundless landscape under its cloudy or  
cloudless destiny:—*this* got the start of you, maid.

And you yourself, how can you tell,—you have conjured up  
prehistoric time in your lover. What feelings  
whelmed up from beings gone by! What women  
hated you in him! What sinister men  
you roused in his youthful veins! Dead children  
were trying to reach you . . . Oh gently, gently  
show him daily a loving, confident task done,—guide him  
close to the garden, give him those counter-  
balancing nights . . . . .  
Withhold him . . . . .

(translated from German by J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender)

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*The Duino Elegies*

# The Fourth Elegy

(by Rainer Maria Rilke)

---

O trees of life, when will your winter come?  
We're never single-minded, unperplexed,  
like migratory birds. Outstript and late,  
we suddenly thrust into the wind, and fall  
into unfeeling ponds. We comprehend  
flowering and fading simultaneously.  
And somewhere lions still roam, all unaware,  
in being magnificent, of any weakness.

We, though, while we're intent upon one thing,  
can feel the cost and conquest of another.  
Hostility's our first response. Aren't lovers  
for ever reaching verges in each other,—  
lovers, that looked for spaces, hunting, home?  
Then, for the sudden sketchwork of a moment,  
a ground of contrast's painfully prepared,  
to make us see it. For they're very clear  
with us, we that don't know our feeling's shape,  
but only that which forms it from outside.  
Who's not sat tense before his own heart's curtain?  
Up it would go: the scenery was parting.  
Easy to understand. The well-known garden,  
swaying a little. Then appeared the dancer  
Not *the!* Enough! However light he foots it,  
he's just disguised, and turns into a bourgeois,  
and passes through the kitchen to his dwelling.  
I will not have those half-filled masks! No, no,  
rather the doll. That's full. I'll force myself  
to bear the husk, the wire, and even the face  
that's all outside. Here! I'm already waiting.  
Even if the lights go out, even if I'm told  
'There's nothing more,'—even if greyish draughts  
of emptiness come drifting from the stage,—  
even if of all my silent forebears none  
sits by me any longer, not a woman,  
not even the boy with the brown squinting eyes:  
I'll still remain. For one can always watch.

Am I not right? You, to whom life would taste  
so bitter, Father, when you tasted mine,  
that turbid first infusion of my Must,  
you kept on tasting as I kept on growing,  
and, fascinated by the after-taste  
of such queer future, tried my clouded gaze,—  
you, who so often since you died, my Father,  
have been afraid within my inmost hope,

surrendering realms of that serenity  
the dead are lords of for my bit of fate,—  
am I not right? And you, am I not right,—  
you that would love me for that small beginning  
of love for you I always turned away from,  
because the space within your faces changed,  
even while I loved it, into cosmic space  
where you no longer were . . . , when I feel like it,  
to wait before the puppet stage,—no, rather  
gaze so intensely on it that at last,  
to upweigh my gaze, an angel has to come  
and play a part there, snatching up the husks?  
Angel and doll! Then there's at last a play.  
Then there unites what we continually  
part by our being there. Then at last  
can spring from our own turning years the cycle  
of the whole going-on. Over and above us  
there's then the angel playing. Look, the dying,—  
surely they must suspect how full of pretext  
is all that we accomplish here, where nothing  
is what it really is. O hours of childhood,  
hours when behind the figures there was more  
than the mere past, and when what lay before us  
was not the future! We were growing, and sometimes  
impatient to grow up, half for the sake  
of those who'd nothing left but their grown-upness.  
Yet, when alone, we entertained ourselves  
with everlastingness: there we would stand,  
within the gap left between world and toy,  
upon a spot which, from the first beginning,  
had been established for a pure event.

Who'll show a child just as it is? Who'll place it  
within its constellation, with the measure  
of distance in its hand? Who'll make its death  
from grey bread, that grows hard,—or leave it there,  
within the round mouth, like the choking core  
of a sweet apple? . . . . Minds of murderers  
are easily divined. But this, though: death,  
the whole of death,—even before life's begun,  
to hold it all so gently, and be good:  
this is beyond description!

(translated from German by J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender)

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The Duino Elegies

The Fifth Elegy

(by Rainer Maria Rilke)

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But tell me, who *are* they, these acrobats, even a little more fleeting than we ourselves,—so urgently, ever since childhood, wrung by an (oh, for the sake of whom?) never-contented will? That keeps on wringing them, bending them, slinging them, swinging them, throwing them and catching them back; as though from an oily smoother air, they come down on the threadbare carpet, thinned by their everlasting upspringing, this carpet forlornly lost in the cosmos. Laid on there like a plaster, as though the suburban sky had injured the earth.

And hardly there, upright, shown there: the great initial letter of Thereeness,—then even the strongest men are rolled once more, in sport, by the ever-returning grasp, as once by Augustus the Strong a tin platter at table.

Alas, and around this centre the rose of onlooking blooms and unblossoms. Round this pestle, this pistil, caught by its own dust-pollen, and fertilised over again to sham-fruit of boredom, their own never-realised boredom, gleaming with thinnest lightly sham-smiling surface.

There, the withered wrinkled lifter, old now and only drumming, shrivelled up in his mighty skin as though it had once contained two men, and one were already lying in the churchyard, and he had outlasted the other, deaf and sometimes a little strange in his widowed skin.

And the youngster, the man, like the son of a neck and a nun: so tautly and smartly filled with muscle and simpleness.

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

You, that fall with the thud only fruits know, unripe, daily a hundred times from the tree of mutually built up motion (the tree that, swifter than water, has spring and summer and autumn in so many minutes), fall and rebound on the grave: sometimes, in half-pauses, a tenderness tries to steal out over your face to your seldomly tender mother, but scatters over your body, whose surface quickly absorbs the timidly rippling, hardly attempted look . . . And again that man is clapping his hands for the downward spring, and before a single pain has got within range of your ever-galloping heart, comes the tingling in the soles of your feet, ahead of the spring that it springs from, chasing into your eyes a few physical tears.

And, spite of all, blindly, your smile. . . .

Angel! Oh, take it, pluck it, that small-flowered herb of healing! Shape a vase to preserve it. Set it among those joys not *yet* opened to us; in a graceful urn praise it, with florally-soaring inscription: “Subrisio Saltat.”

Then you, my darling, mutely elided by all the most exquisite joys. Perhaps your frills are happy on your behalf,—or over your tight young breasts the green metallic silk feels itself endlessly spoiled and in need of nothing. You, time after time, upon all of the quivering scale-pans of balance freshly laid fruit of serenity, publicly shown among shoulders.

Where, oh where in the world is that place in my heart where they still were far from being *able*, still fell away from each other like mounting animals, not yet properly paired;—where weights are still heavy, and hoops still stagger away from their vainly twirling sticks? . . . .

And then, in this wearisome nowhere, all of a sudden, the ineffable spot where the pure too-little incomprehensibility changes,—springs round into that empty too-much? Where the many-digitated sum solves into zero?

Squares, o square in Paris, infinite show-place, where the modiste Madame Lamort winds and binds the restless ways of the world, those endless ribbons, to ever-new creations of bow, frill, flower, cockade and fruit, all falsely-coloured, to deck the cheep winter-hats of Fate.

. . . . .  
Angel: suppose there’s a place we know nothing about, and there, on some indescribable carpet, lovers show all that here they’re for ever unable to manage—their daring lofty figures of heart-flight, their towers of pleasure, their ladders, long since, where ground never was, just quiveringly propped by each other,—suppose they could manage it there, before the spectators ringed round, the countless un murmuring dead: would not the dead then fling their last, their for ever reserved, ever-concealed, unknown to us, ever-valid coins of happiness down before the at last truthfully smiling pair on the quietened carpet?

(translated from German by J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender)

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*The Duino Elegies*

# The Sixth Elegy

(by Rainer Maria Rilke)

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Fig tree, how long it's been full meaning for me,  
the way you almost entirely omit to flower  
and into the seasonably-resolute fruit  
uncelebratedly thrust your purest secret.  
Like the tube of a fountain, your bent bough drives the sap  
downwards and up: and it leaps from its sleep, scarce waking,  
into the joy of its sweetest achievement. Look,  
like Jupiter into the swan.

. . . . But we, we linger,  
alas, we glory in flowering; already betrayed  
we reach the retarded core of our ultimate fruit.  
In few the pressure of action rises so strongly  
that already they're stationed and glowing in fulness of heart,  
when, seductive as evening air, the temptation to flower,  
touching the youth of their mouths, touching their eyelids, appears:  
only in heroes, perhaps, and those marked for early removal,  
those in whom gardening Death's differently twisted the veins.  
These go plunging ahead: preceding their own  
victorious smile, as the team of horse in the mildly-  
moulded reliefs of Karnak the conquering King.

Yes, the Hero's strangely akin to the youthfully-dead. Continuance  
doesn't concern him. His rising existence. Time and again  
he takes himself off and enters the changed constellation  
his changeless peril's assumed. There few could find him. But Fate,  
who deals so darkly with us, enraptured all of a sudden,

sings him into the storm of her roaring world.  
None do I hear like him. There suddenly rushing through me,  
borne by the streaming air, his dull-thunderous tone.

And then how gladly I'd hide from the longing: oh would,  
would that I were a boy and might come to it yet, and be sitting,  
propped upon arms still to be, and reading of Samson,  
how his mother at first bore nothing, and, afterwards, all.

Was he not hero already, within you, O mother, and did not  
his lordly choice being there, already, within you?  
Thousands were brewing in the womb and trying to be *he*,  
but, look! he seized and discarded, chose and was able to do.  
And if ever he shattered columns, that was the time, when he burst  
out of the world of your body into the narrower world,  
where he went on choosing and doing. O mothers of heroes!  
Sources of ravaging rivers! Gorges wherein,  
from high on the heart's edge, weeping,  
maids have already plunged, victims—to be for the son.  
For whenever the Hero stormed through the halts of love,  
each heart beating for him could only lift him beyond it:  
turning away, he'd stand at the end of the smiles—another.

(translated from German by J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender)

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*The Duino Elegies*

# The Seventh Elegy

(by Rainer Maria Rilke)

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Not wooing, no longer shall wooing, voice that's outgrown it,  
be now the form of your cry; though you cried as pure as the bird  
when the surging season uplifts him, almost forgetting  
he's merely a fretful creature and not just a single heart  
she's tossing to brightness, to intimate azure. No less  
than he, you, too, would be wooing some silent companion  
to feel you, as yet unseen, some mate in whom a reply  
was slowly awaking and warming itself as she listened,—  
your own emboldened feeling's glowing fellow-feeling.  
Oh, and Spring would understand—not a nook would fail  
to re-echo annunciation. Re-echoing first the tiny  
questioning pipe a purely affirmative day  
quietly invests all round with magnifying stillness.  
Then the long flight of steps, the call-steps, up to the dreamt-of  
temple of what's to come;—then the trill, that fountain  
caught as it rises by falling, in promiscuous play,  
for another thrusting jet . . . And before it, the Summer!  
Not only all the summer dawns, not only  
the way they turn into day and shine before sunrise.  
Not only the days, so gentle round flowers, and, above,  
around the configured trees, so mighty and strong.  
Not only the fervour of these unfolded forces,  
not only the walks, not only the evening meadows,  
not only, after late thunder, the breathing clearness,  
not only, with evening, sleep coming, and something surmised. . .  
No, but the nights as well! the lofty, the summer  
nights,—but the stars as well, the stars of the earth!  
Oh, to be dead at last and endlessly know them,  
all the stars! For how, how, how to forget them!

Look, I've been calling the lover. But not only she  
would come . . . Out of unwitholding graves  
girls would come and gather . . . For how could I limit  
the call I had called? The sunken are always seeking  
earth again.—You children, I'd say, a single  
thing comprehended here's as good as a thousand.  
Don't think Destiny's more than what's packed into childhood.  
How often you'd overtake the beloved, panting,  
panting for blissful career, without end, into freedom!  
Life here's glorious! Even you knew it, you girls,  
who went without, as it seemed, sank under,—you, in the vilest  
streets of cities, festering, or open for refuse.  
For to each was granted an hour,—perhaps not quite  
so much as an hour—some span that could scarcely be measured  
by measures of time, in between two whiles, when she really  
possessed an existence. All. Veins full of existence.  
But we so lightly forget what our laughing neighbour  
neither confirms nor envies. We want to be visibly  
able to show it, whereas the most visible joy  
can only reveal itself to us when we've transformed it, within.

Nowhere, beloved, can world exist but within.  
Life passes in transformation. And, ever diminishing,

vanishes what's outside. Where once was a lasting house,  
up starts some invented structure across our vision, as fully  
at home among concepts as though it still stood in a brain.  
Spacious garner of power are transformed by the Time Spirit, formless  
as that tense urge he's extracting from everything else.  
Temples he knows no longer. We're now more secretly saving  
such lavish expenses of heart. Nay, even where one survives,  
one single thing once prayed or tended or knelt to,  
it's reaching, just as it is, into the unseen world.  
Many perceive it no more, but neglect the advantage  
of building it grandlier now, with pillars and statues, *within!*

Each torpid turn of the world has such disinherited children,  
to whom no longer what's been, and not yet what's coming, belongs.  
For the nearest, next coming, is remote for mankind. Though this  
shall not confuse us, shall rather confirm us in keeping  
still recognisable form. This *stood* once among mankind,  
in the midst of not-knowing-whither, as though it existed, and bowed  
stars from established heavens towards it. Angel,  
I'll show it to you as well—there! In your gaze  
it shall stand redeemed at last, in a final uprightness.  
Pillars, pylons, the Sphinx, all the striving thrust,  
grey, from fading or foreign town, of the spire!  
Wasn't all this a miracle? Angel, gaze, for it's *we*—  
O mightiness, tell them that *we* were capable of it—my breath's  
too short for this celebration. So, after all, we have *not*  
failed to make use of the spaces, these generous spaces, these,  
*our* spaces. (How terribly big they must be,  
when, with thousands of years of our feeling, they're not over-crowded.)  
But a tower was great, was it not? Oh, Angel, it was, though,—  
even compared with you? Chartres was great—and music  
towered still higher and passed beyond us. Why, even  
a girl in love, alone, at her window, at night . . .  
did she not reach to your knee?

Don't think that I'm wooing!

Angel, even if I were, you'd never come. For my call  
is always full of 'Away!' Against such a powerful  
current you cannot advance. Like an outstretched  
arm is my call. And its clutching, upwardly  
open hand is always before you  
as open for warding and warning,  
aloft there, Inapprehensible.

(translated from German by J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender)



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*The Duino Elegies*

# The Eighth Elegy

(by Rainer Maria Rilke)

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With all its eyes the creature-world beholds  
the open. But our eyes, as though reversed,  
encircle it on every side, like traps  
set round its unobstructed path to freedom.  
What *is* outside, we know from the brute's face  
alone; for while a child's quite small we take it  
and turn it round and force it to look backwards  
at conformation, not that openness  
so deep within the brute's face. Free from death.  
We only see death; the free animal  
has its decease perpetually behind it  
and God in front, and when it moves, it moves  
into eternity, like running springs.  
We've never, no, not for a single day,  
pure space before us, such as that which flowers  
endlessly open into: always world,  
and never nowhere without no: that pure,  
unsupervised element one breaths,  
endlessly knows, and never craves. A child  
sometimes gets quietly lost there, to be always  
jogged back again. Or someone dies and *is* it.  
For, nearing death, one perceives death no longer,  
and stares ahead—perhaps with large brute gaze.  
Lovers—were not the other present, always  
spoil the view!—draw near to it and wonder. . . .  
Behind the other, as though through oversight,  
the thing's revealed . . . But no one gets beyond  
the other, and so world returns once more.  
Always facing Creation, we perceive there  
only a mirroring of the free and open,  
dimmed by our breath. Or that a dumb brute's calmly  
raising its head to look us through and through.  
That's what Destiny means: being opposite,  
and nothing else, and always opposite.

Did consciousness such as we have exist  
in the sure animal that moves towards us  
upon a different course, the brute would drag us  
round in its wake. But its own being for it  
is infinite, inapprehensible,  
unintrospective, pure, like its outward gaze.  
Where we see Future, it sees Everything,  
itself in Everything, for ever healed.

And yet, within the wakefully-warm beast  
there lies the weight and care of a great sadness.

For that which often overwhelms us clings  
to him as well,—a kind of memory  
that what we're pressing after now was once  
nearer and truer and attached to us  
with infinite tenderness. Here all is distance,  
there it was breath. Compared with that first home  
the second seems ambiguous and draughty.  
Oh bliss of *tiny* creatures that *remain*  
for ever in the womb that brought them forth!  
Joy of the gnat, that can still leap *within*,  
even on its wedding-day: for womb is all.  
Look at the half-assurance of the bird,  
through origin almost aware of both,  
like one of those Etruscan souls, escaped  
from a dead man enclosed within a space  
on which his resting figure forms a lid.  
And how dismayed is any womb-born thing  
that has to fly! As though it were afraid  
of its own self, it zigzags through the air  
like crack through cup. The way the track of a bat  
goes rending through the evening's porcelain.

And we, spectators always, everywhere,  
looking at, never out of, everything!  
It fills us. We arrange it. it decays.  
We re-arrange it, and decay ourselves.

Who's turned us round like this, so that we always,  
do what we may, retain the attitude  
of someone who's departing? Just as he,  
on the last hill, that shows him all this valley  
for the last time, will turn and stop and linger,  
we live our lives, for ever taking leave.

(translated from German by J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender)

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*The Duino Elegies*

# The Ninth Elegy

(by Rainer Maria Rilke)

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Why, when this span of life might be fledged away  
as laurel, a little darker than all  
the surrounding green, with tiny waves on the border  
of every leaf (like the smile of a wind):—oh, why  
*have* to be human, and, shunning Destiny,  
long for Destiny? . . .

Not because happiness really  
exists, that premature profit of imminent loss.  
Not out of curiosity, not just to practise the heart,  
that could still be there in laurel. . . .  
But because being here amounts to so much, because all  
this Here and Now, so fleeting, seems to require us and strangely  
concern us. Us the most fleeting of all. Just once,  
everything, only for once. Once and no more. And we, too,  
once. And never again. But this  
having been once, though only once,  
having been once on earth—can it ever be cancelled?

And so we keep pressing on and trying to perform it,  
trying to contain it within our simple hands,  
in the more and more crowded gaze, in the speechless heart.  
Trying to become it. To give it to whom? We'd rather  
hold on to it all for ever. . . . Alas, but the other relation,—  
what can be taken across? Not the art of seeing, learnt here  
so slowly, and nothing that's happened here. Nothing at all.  
Sufferings, then. Above all, the hardness of life,  
the long experience of love; in fact,  
purely untellable things. But later,  
under the stars, what then? the more deeply untellable stars?  
For the wanderer doesn't bring from the mountain slope  
a handful of earth to the valley, untellable earth, but only  
some word he has won, a pure word, the yellow and blue  
gentian. Are we, perhaps, here just for saying: House,  
Bridge, Fountain, Gate, Jug, Olive tree, Window,—  
possibly: Pillar, Tower? . . . but for saying, remember,  
oh, for such saying as never the things themselves  
hoped so intensely to be. Is not the secret purpose  
of this sly earth, in urging a pair of lovers,  
just to make everything leap with ecstasy in them?  
Threshold: how much it can mean  
to two lovers, that they should be wearing their own  
worn threshold a little, they too, after the many before,  
before the many to come, . . . as a matter of course!

*Here* is the time for the Tellable, *here* is its home.  
Speak and proclaim. More than ever

the things we can live with are falling away, and their place  
being oustingly taken up by an imageless act.  
Act under crusts, that will readily split as soon  
as the doing within outgrows them and takes a new outline.  
Between the hammers lives on  
our heart, as between the teeth  
the tongue, which, nevertheless,  
remains the bestower of praise.

Praise the world to the Angel, not the untellable: you  
can't impress him with the splendour you've felt; in the cosmos  
where he more feelingly feels you're only a tyro. So show him  
some simple thing, remoulded by age after age,  
till it lives in your hands and eyes as a part of ourselves.  
Tell him *things*. He'll stand more astonished; as you did  
beside the roper in Rome or the potter in Egypt.  
Show him how happy a thing can be, how guileless and ours;  
how even the moaning of grief purely determines on form,  
serves as a thing, or dies into a thing,—to escape  
to a bliss beyond the fiddle. These things that live on departure  
understand when you praise them: fleeting, they look for  
rescue through something in us, the most fleeting of all.  
Want us to change them entirely, within our invisible hearts,  
into—oh, endlessly—into ourselves! Whosoever we are.

Earth, isn't this what you want: an invisible  
re-arising in us? Is it not your dream  
to be one day invisible? Earth! invisible!  
What is your urgent command, if not transformation?  
Earth, you darling, I will! Oh, believe me, you need  
your Springs no longer to win me: a single one,  
just one, is already more than my blood can endure.  
I've now been unspeakably yours for ages and ages.  
You were always right, and your holiest inspiration's  
Death, that friendly Death.  
Look, I am living. On what? Neither childhood nor future  
are growing less. . . . Supernumerous existence  
wells up in my heart.

(translated from German by J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender)

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*The Duino Elegies*

# The Tenth Elegy

(by Rainer Maria Rilke)

---

Someday, emerging at last from this terrifying vision,  
may I burst into jubilant praise to assenting Angels!  
May not even one of the clear-struck keys of the heart  
fail to respond through alighting on slack or doubtful  
or rending strings! May a new-found splendour appear  
in my streaming face! May inconspicuous Weeping  
flower! How dear you will be to me then, you Nights  
of Affliction! Oh, why did I not, inconsolable sisters,  
more bendingly kneel to receive you, more loosely surrender  
myself to your loosened hair? We wasters of sorrows!  
How we stare away into sad endurance beyond them,  
trying to foresee their end! Whereas they are nothing else  
than our winter foliage, our sombre evergreen, *one*  
of the seasons of our interior year,—not only  
seasons—they're also place, settlement, camp, soil, dwelling.

Strange, though, alas! are the streets of the City of Pain,  
where, in the seeming stillness of uproar outroared,  
stoutly, a thing cast out from the mould of vacuity,  
swaggers that gilded fuss, the bursting memorial.  
How an Angel would tread beyond trace their market of comfort,  
with the church alongside, bought ready for use: as clean  
and disenchanting and shut as the Post on a Sunday!  
Outside, though, there's always the billowing edge of the fair.  
Swings of Freedom! Divers and Jugglers of Zeal!  
And the life-like shooting-ranges of bedizened Happiness: targets  
tumbling in tinny contortions whenever some better shot  
happens to hit one. Cheer-struck, on he goes reeling  
after his luck. For booths that can please  
the most curious tastes are drumming and bawling. Especially  
worth seeing (for adults only): the breeding of money!  
Anatomy made amusing! Money's organs on view!  
Nothing concealed! Instructive, and guaranteed  
to increase fertility! . . . . .

. . . Oh, and then just outside,  
behind the last hoarding, plastered with placards for "Deathless,"  
that bitter beer that tastes quite sweet to its drinkers  
so long as they chew with it plenty of fresh distractions,—  
just at the back of the hoardings, just behind them, it's real!  
Children are playing, and lovers holding each other,—aside,  
gravely, in pitiful grass, and dogs are following nature.  
The youth is drawn further on; perhaps he's in love with a youthful  
Lament . . . He emerges behind her into the meadows, she says:  
A long way. We live out there. . . .

Where? And the youth  
follows. He's touched by her manner. Her shoulder, her neck,—perhaps  
she comes from a famous stock? But he leaves her, turns back,  
looks round, nods . . . What's the use? She's just a Lament.

Only the youthfully-dead, in their first condition  
of timeless serenity, that of being weaned,  
follow her lovingly. Girls  
she awaits and befriends. Gently, she shows them  
what she is wearing. Pearls of Pain and the fine-spun  
Veils of Patience.—Youths  
she walks with in silence.

But there, where they live, in the valley, one of the elder Laments  
takes to the youth when he questions her:—We were once,  
she says, a great family, we Lamentations. Our fathers  
worked the mines in that mountain-range: among men  
you'll find a lump, now and then, of polished original pain,

or of drossy petrified rage from some old volcano.  
Yes, that came from there. We used to be rich.

And lightly she leads him on through the spacious landscape  
of Lamentations, shows him the temple columns, the ruins  
of towers from which, long ago, Lords of the House of Lament  
wisely governed the land. Shows him the tall  
Tear trees, shows him the fields of flowering Sadness  
(only as tender foliage known to the living);  
shows him the pasturing herds of Grief,—and, at times,  
a startled bird, flying straight through their field of vision,  
scrawls the far-stretching scree of its lonely cry.—  
At evening she leads him on to the graves of the longest  
lived of the House of Lament, the sibyls and warners.  
But, night approaching, they move more gently, and soon  
upsurges, bathed in moonlight, the all-  
guarding sepulchral stone. Twin-brother to that on the Nile,  
the lofty Sphinx, the taciturn chamber's gaze.  
And they start at the regal head that has silently poised,  
for ever, the human face  
on the scale of the stars.

His sight, still dizzy with early death,  
can't take it in. But her gaze  
frightens an owl from behind the pschent. And the bird,  
brushing, in slow neat-quitting, along the cheek,  
the one with the ripest curve,  
faintly inscribes on the new  
death-born hearing, as though on the double  
page of an opened book, the indescribable outline.

And, higher, the stars. New ones. Stars of the Land of Pain.  
Slowly she names them: "There,  
look: the *Rider*, the *Staff*, and that fuller constellation  
they call *Fruitgarland*. Then, further, towards the Pole:  
*Cradle*, *Way*, *The Burning Book*, *Doll*, *Window*.  
But up in the southern sky, pure as within the palm  
of a consecrated hand, the clearly-resplendent *M*,  
standing for Mothers. . . ."

But the dead must go on, and, in silence, the elder Lament  
brings him as far as the gorge  
where it gleams in the moonlight,—  
there, the source of Joy. With awe  
she names it, says "Among men  
it's a carrying stream."

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

Alone, he climbs to the mountains of Primal Pain.  
And never once does his step resound from the soundless fate.

And yet, were they waking a likeness within us, the endlessly dead,  
look, they'd be pointing, perhaps, to the catkins, hanging  
from empty hazels, or else they'd be meaning the rain  
that falls on the dark earth in the early Spring.

And we, who have always thought  
of happiness climbing, would feel  
the emotion that almost startles  
when happiness falls.

(translated from German by J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender)