

Rainer Maria Rilke: Five Poems Translated By Anthony Stephens

ORPHEUS. EURYDIKE. HERMES

*This was the deep, outlandish mine of souls.
Silently they traversed its darkness like
veins of silver ore. From among roots
sprang out the blood that flows on to emerge
in humankind, and here it looked as heavy
as porphyry in the gloom. Nothing else red.*

*Abysms there were here
and insubstantial forests, bridges over
vacuity and that grey, sightless lake,
suspended over its own depths, as rain-clouds
brood on a landscape. And between the meadows,
patient and meandering, a ribbon
of path appeared, like cloth spread out to bleach.
And now along this single way they came.*

*In front the slender man in a blue cloak,
with eyes fixed straight ahead, lips tight, impatient.
In great mouthfuls his pace devoured the way,
gulping it down; his hands, closed-up and heavy,
hung from the folds, and now had quite forgotten
the fragile lyre grown into his left hand
as briars grow into an olive branch.
And all his senses were at enmity
with one another: like a dog his sight
ran before him, turned round, came back and ran*

*off again to wait at the next turning;
but, like a scent, his hearing lingered on
after him. Sometimes he thought it reached
as far behind as the two others were
who should be following his whole ascent.
But the next moment he felt only echoes
of his own steps, his cloak's wind at his back.
But still he told himself that they were there,
said it aloud and heard the echoes dying.*

*They were still coming - it was just they walked
with frightful quietness. If it were permitted
to turn round once .. (But looking back would ruin
this whole great work just short of glory.) ..
then he must see them both, the two quiet walkers
he knew were following his steps unspeaking:*

*The God of Ways, the divine messenger,
his helmet shading stabbing eyes, his staff
held out before, wings beating at his heels
and his left hand extended, leading her.*

*She, so well beloved that from one lyre
more lament came than ever from those women
hired to wail at funerals: so that a world
of mourning came to be in which all things
were there a second time, valleys and woods,
pathways and villages - fields, rivers, beasts,
and that about this world of mourning, just
as round the other earth, another sun
and a new heaven of dumb stars rotated,*

*a night-sky of lament, with constellations
all awry -: she, the so well beloved.*

*But she was walking at the god's left hand,
her steps impeded by her long grave-wrappings,
uncertain, gentle and without impatience.
She was contained within herself, as if
she were with child and gave the man no thought
who went before her, no thought to the way
that climbed up into life. She was within
herself. And being in death fulfilled
her like fruition. She was pregnant with
her own great death, like a fruit full of sweetness
and dark - it was so new to her that she
understood nothing.*

*She lived now in a new virginity,
untouchable; her sex had closed itself
like a young flower at dusk, and her two hands
had grown so far away from matrimony
that the god's infinitely careful touch
offended her like an advance. She was
no longer that blond girl whose presence sometimes
rang in the poet's songs, no longer she
who made his bed a scented, magic island -
she was no longer this man's property.*

*For she was loosed and spread like fallen tresses,
like fallen rain expended, scattered far
like grain a hundredfold in time of famine.*

Already she was root.

*When suddenly
the god's hand pulled her back and in a voice
that showed his pain he cried: He has turned round. -
she did not understand, asked softly: Who?*

Far off, and dark against the brighter portal

*someone was standing she could not make out.
He stood and watched while on the distant path
sadly the God of Messages turned round,
in silence, following the shape that had
already started back the self-same journey,
her steps impeded by her long grave-wrappings,
uncertain, gentle and without impatience.*

DEATH OF THE BELOVED

*He knew of death only what we all know:
that it takes us and thrusts us into silence.
But when she died, not torn from him with violence,
no, gently eased out of his sight, a slow
glide away from him to unknown ghosts;
and when he felt that these now had her smile
to be their moon, as he had for a while,
and they now held the warmth that he had lost:*

*then he felt so familiar with the dead,
as if through her he were a close relation
of every one of them - he did not care
or believe whatever others said:
he named Death's Land in pure exultation
and felt for her footprints on it everywhere.*

UNFINISHED ELEGY (1920)

*That childhood was, this nameless
pledge the gods kept, don't let what becomes revoke it.
Even the prisoner, rotting to dark in his cell,
has had her secretly tending him until he dies.
For she holds the heart safe above all transience.*

Even the dying, when their fixed stare shows they know it,
even when their own room no longer answers them
since it is curable - all their curable objects
lying about them, fevered, infected,
but still curable -
yet even here, for these dying
childhood bears fruit.
House-proud, amid nature's dilapidation,
she tends the heart's garden.

Don't think she is innocent! That old
cosmetic fallacy once prettified her, let her dissemble,
but no more! She is no more secure than we are
and no more protected; yet no god outweighs her. She is
defenceless as we are - defenceless as beasts in winter.
No: still more defenceless - she knows no hiding places.
Defenceless as if she were the threat itself. Defenceless
as a fire, as a giant, as a poison, as something
walking by night in a house locked up and abandoned.

For who cannot grasp that the hands that cherish are liars,
that the hands that protect are themselves already in danger?

Who?

Is allowed?

I.

What I?

I, mother, I'm allowed. I was before world was.
The earth told me secrets of what she does with the seeds
to make them be whole. Evenings, oh: feasts of trust! We both
rained together, like a quiet April, Earth and I,
into our own womb.

*Male-child, who could hope to make you believe in
the fertile harmony that we knew in ourselves? For you
there will be no annunciation of the world's stillness,
enfolding a bud's growth -*

*Goodness of mothers, their voice to a child at the breast.
But yet!
What you invoke is the peril now, the whole, pure
danger the world is in. But all the peril,
if your feelings explore to its end, will turn into safety.
The kernel of childhood rests in the centre of fear:
enduring all fear, then fearless.*

Lines written in the Cemetery at Ragaz 1924

THE (IMAGINARY) CHILD'S GRAVE WITH THE BALL

*No angels in metal or wood,
none of these crosses could
serve to remind of your time;
only death's counting rhyme*

*is yours to say over again.
But let the ball lie here
you loved to throw in the air
so it fell as simply as rain -*

*lie here in a golden net
on your bed in the square, cold pit.
Its rest now, like its flight before,
both obedient to one law.*

CHRIST'S DESCENT INTO HELL

*His being, once the torment had run its course,
slipped from the brutal husk of pain up there,
let go. And the darkness took fright all at once
to find itself alone, and hurled
bats at the pallid corpse, - even now at night
their patterns in the sky betray the fear
of hitting that chill agony. Dark, restless air
lost heart as it brushed the body, and in the strong,
watchful creatures of night was torpor and dullness.
His spirit, now freed, first thought, perhaps, to take its place
within the landscape, passive: for the act of his suffering
still seemed to him sufficient. The inanimate
world had its own fine, nocturnal balance,
and, like a dimension of sadness, his spirit embraced it.
But the earth, parched dry in the thirst of his wounds,
the earth split open and a voice
called from the abyss.
He, connoisseur of torments, heard Hell howling
towards him, clamouring for knowledge of his now final
passion: that Hell's own steady torments might be amazed
at his infinite pain's consummation.*

And he, the spirit,
plummeted down with the full weight of exhaustion,
strode as one hastening through the stupefied vision
of pasturing shades, looked up to see Adam, hurriedly, then
hurtled down, vanished, appeared and was lost again
in the depths of the wilder abyss. Suddenly
(higher now, higher!) above the spume
of foaming waves of anguish, he stepped out on the high
tower of his passion. Stood without breath,
with no balustrade. Proprietor of all
this pain, was silent.