

# Rainer Maria Rilke: *Fourth Duino Elegy* Translated By Anthony Stephens

*O trees of life, when does your winter come?  
We are not whole, not certain like the birds  
when they migrate. Suddenly, out of season,  
we fling ourselves too late upon the winds  
and fall like leaves on some indifferent pond.  
Our minds hold bloom and withering at once.  
And somewhere lions still stalk about and know  
no impotence through their days of lordship.*

*But we, each time we mean one thing completely  
must also feel the other. Enmity  
is closest to us. Do not lovers always  
strike barriers in each other, where they promised  
to give the other space to hunt and shelter?*

*Somewhere, for the impression of a moment,  
is made a base of opposition, slowly,  
so that we see it - for we are not  
treated with subtlety. We do not know  
the contour of emotion, just the force  
that shapes it from outside.*

Who has not sat in fear before the curtain  
of his own heart? It opens, with the scenery  
set for farewells, hard to mistake: the well-known  
garden swaying on its painted flats.  
Then came the Dancer. Not him! Enough!  
For all his suppleness, he is disguised,  
and when he takes it off he is a bourgeois  
and enters his apartment through the kitchen.  
I reject all these half-filled masks; I'd rather  
the puppet. It is full. I will endure  
the skin, the wire and its face that only  
looks outwards. Here! I'm here before the stage.  
Even if the lamps go out, if I am told  
there is no more, even if from the curtains  
nothingness blows towards me in the grey  
draught; if of my silent forebears no one  
sits with me here, no woman, no not even  
the boy from childhood with the brown wall-eye - -:  
I will remain. I can still be an audience.

Am I not right? You, for whom life about me  
tasted so bitter, Father, having me  
on your tongue, the first cloudy infusion  
of what I was, must be - you, always tasting  
over again my being there, forced to take  
notice of the aftertaste of my  
quite alien future - - you tested my cunning,  
veiled glance upwards. You, Father, who since  
you are dead, often, in all my hope  
with in me are afraid and feel serene  
as well, feel all the great serenity  
that the dead have, but give this up for my  
small bit of fate - - Father, am I not right?  
And you, who once loved me for the small love

that I began towards you, but then changed,  
always broke off because I saw the clear  
space in your visage, in the time I loved it,  
turn into heaven's vastness in which you  
no longer were .. Tell me, am I not right,  
if I still feel I must wait here before  
the puppet theatre, no: must gaze at it  
with such whole concentration, that to balance  
my gaze at last an angel has to come  
to act upon the stage and animate  
the figures: angel and puppet, then at last  
a play's performed. Then all things come together  
that we divide simply by being there.  
Then our several seasons can combine  
to make up the whole ring of transformations.  
If that can be, the angel plays above us ..

But surely the dying have some intimation  
how full of pretexts all our makings are.  
Everything is not itself. Oh hours  
in childhood, when each shape we knew had more  
than just the past behind it and ahead  
of us was nothing called the future. Of course  
we were growing, sometimes couldn't wait  
to be grown up, half out of kindness for  
all those who had nothing but their adulthood.  
And yet we were, as we walked all alone  
the no-man's-land between the world and playthings,  
enchanted with a steady joy - - we stood  
upon a place founded before all time  
to be the locus of a pure event.

*Who shows a child the way things are? Who puts  
it into constellations, gives the measure  
of detachment in its hand to use?  
Who makes the death of children out of that  
grey bread that dries hard - who is it pokes  
it in the child's round mouth, just like the core  
of a once juicy apple? ..*

*Murderers*

*aren't hard to understand. But this: to hold  
death, all of death before life starts, to hold  
it so gently in oneself and yet  
to feel no rage: this is beyond all words.*