

The First Elegy

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels' hierarchies?

and even if one of them pressed me suddenly against his heart:
I would be consumed in that overwhelming existence.
For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we are still just able to endure,
and we are so awed because it serenely disdains to annihilate us.
Every angel is terrifying.
And so I hold myself back and swallow the call-note of my dark sobbing.
Ah, whom can we ever turn to in our need?
Not angels, not humans, and already the knowing animals are aware
that we are not really at home in our interpreted world.
Perhaps there remains for us some tree on a hillside, which every day we can take into
our vision;
there remains for us yesterday's street and the loyalty of a habit so much at ease
when it stayed with us that it moved in and never left.
Oh and night: there is night, when a wind full of infinite space gnaws at our faces.
Whom would it not remain for—that longed-after, mildly disillusioning presence,
which the solitary heart so painfully meets.
Is it any less difficult for lovers?
But they keep on using each other to hide their own fate.
Don't you know *yet*?
Fling the emptiness out of your arms into the spaces we breathe;
perhaps the birds will feel the expanded air with more passionate flying.

Yes—the springtimes needed you. Often a star was waiting for you to notice it.
A wave rolled toward you out of the distant past,

or as you walked under an open window, a violin yielded itself to your hearing.
All this was mission. But could you accomplish it?
Weren't you always distracted by expectation, as if every event announced a beloved?
(Where can you find a place to keep her, with all the huge strange thoughts inside you
going and coming and often staying all night.)
But when you feel longing, sing of women in love; for their famous passion is still not
immortal.
Sing of women abandoned and desolate (you envy them, almost)
who could love so much more purely than those who were gratified.
Begin again and again the never-attainable praising; remember: the hero lives on;

even his downfall was merely a pretext for achieving his final birth.
But Nature, spent and exhausted, takes lovers back into herself,
as if there were not enough strength to create them a second time.
Have you imagined Gaspara Stampa intensely enough
so that any girl deserted by her beloved might be inspired by that fierce example of
soaring,
objectless love and might say to herself, "Perhaps I can be like her?"
Shouldn't this most ancient of sufferings finally grow more fruitful for us?
Isn't it time that we lovingly freed ourselves from the beloved and,
quivering, endured: as the arrow endures the bowstring's tension,
so that gathered in the snap of release it can be more than itself.
For there is no place where we can remain.

Voices. Voices. Listen, my heart, as only saints have listened:

until the gigantic call lifted them off the ground;
yet they kept on, impossibly, kneeling and didn't notice at all: so complete was their
listening.

Not that you could endure *God's* voice—far from it.

But listen to the voice of the wind and the ceaseless message that forms itself out of
silence.

It is murmuring toward you now from those who died young.

Didn't their fate, whenever you stepped into a church in Naples or Rome,
quietly come to address you?

Or high up, some eulogy entrusted you with a mission,
as, last year, on the plaque in Santa Maria Formosa.

What they want of me is that I gently remove the appearance of injustice about their
death—

which at times slightly hinders their souls from proceeding onward.

Of course, it is strange to inhabit the earth no longer,

to give up customs one barely had time to learn,
not to see roses and other promising Things in terms of a human future;
no longer to be what one was in infinitely anxious hands;
to leave even one's own first name behind,
forgetting it as easily as a child abandons a broken toy.

Strange to no longer desire one's desires.

Strange to see meanings that clung together once, floating away in every direction.

And being dead is hard work and full of retrieval before one can gradually feel a trace
of eternity.

Though the living are wrong to believe in the too-sharp distinctions which
they themselves have created.

Angels (they say) don't know whether it is the living they are moving among, or the dead.

The eternal torrent whirls all ages along in it, through both realms forever, and their voices are drowned out in its thunderous roar.

In the end, those who were carried off early no longer need us:

they are weaned from earth's sorrows and joys,
as gently as children outgrow the soft breasts of their mothers.

But we, who do need such great mysteries,
we for whom grief is so often the source of our spirit's growth—:
could we exist without *them*?

Is the legend meaningless that tells how, in the lament for Linus,
the daring first notes of song pierced through the barren numbness;
and then in the startled space which a youth as lovely as a god has suddenly left forever,
the Void felt for the first time that harmony which now enraptures and comforts and helps us.¹

¹ From *Duino Elegies* by Rainer Maria Rilke. Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1992.