

Alison Croggon

Two Duino Elegies – Rainer Maria Rilke

The First Elegy

Who, if I cry, hears me among the angelic
orders? and even supposing one of them seized me
suddenly to his heart: I'd vanish
in his violent presence. For beauty is nothing
but this terrifying beginning, which astonishingly we 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 call
in darkening sobs. Ah, 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 fidelity of a 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?
Ah, 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 all announced
a nearby lover? (How could you hold her,
when the vast strange thoughts within you
wink in and out and often stay all night.)
Yet it desires you; so sing the lovers: their renowned
feelings are far from immortal enough.
Those abandoned, you envied them almost, whom you found
so much more loving than the requited: perpetually
begin their unattainable praise.
Think: the hero survives, his foundering self
is but a pretext for 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 would feel this love
for her stronger example: if I could be like her?
Shouldn't at last these oldest sufferings
bear more fruit? Isn't it 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 those young dead towards you.
Whenever you entered a church in Rome and Naples,
didn't their destiny silently press 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 those relations 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 longer, 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 left forever, first struck in the void
that other vibration, which now overwhelms us,
and comforts, and helps.

The Ninth Elegy

Why, when it approaches, the interval of life
surges forward, as laurel, a little darker than all
other green, with tiny waves on every
leaf edge (like a smiling wind) -: why then
must we be human - and, shunning destiny,
long for destiny ...

Oh, not because there is happiness,
that hurried gain so close to loss.

Not out of curiosity, nor for the heart's use
which was also in the laurel

But because being here is so much and all that is here
seems to desire us, these vanishings, that so strangely
approach us. Us, the most vanishing. Each thing once,
only once. Once and no more. And we also
once. Never again. But this
once was real, even if only once:
earthly and real, shining beyond revocation.

And so we compel ourselves and will to achieve it,
will to hold in our simple hands,
in the generous glance and in speechless hearts.
Will to become it. To give to whom? We'd love
to keep it forever. Ah, to that other dimension,
woe, what can be taken there? Not that intuitive sight, learnt
here

so slowly, and nothing that happened here. Nothing.
Thus the sorrows. Thus, most of all, the weight of being,
thus love's slow unfolding - thus
the purely unsayable. But later,
under the stars, what then: they are better unsaid.
Yet the wanderer brings from the mountain edge
not a handful of speechless earth, but a word
hard-won, absolute, the yellow and blue

They want us to change them wholly in our invisible hearts
into - o endlessly - into ourselves! which finally also we are.

Earth, isn't this what you want: invisibly
rising within us? Isn't your dream
just once to be invisible? Earth! Invisible!
What, if not transformation, is your urgent order?
Earth, my love, I will. Oh faith, my yielding to you needs
no more of your springs, one,
ah, only one is already too much for my blood.
I've been namelessly yours from the very beginning.
You were always right, and your holiest insight
is this intimate death.
See, I live. On what? Neither childhood nor the future
dwindles Supernumerous being
springs in my heart.