

Rainer Maria Rilke:

Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes and Six sonnets from The Sonnets to Orpheus, Part Two

translated by [Art Beck](#)

Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes

Imagine a mineshaft of souls
running as silently through the dark
as silver veins flow, and blood welling
among the roots, on its route to humanity,
clotting like porphyry in the shadows.
Other than this - nothing was red.

There were boulders,
spectral forests, bridges over emptiness,
and the great grey blind pool
suspended over its depths
like rain clouds over a landscape.
And out of these meadows, a vague strip
of trail, gently and patiently, unwound
like a long, pale bandage.

And this is the path they traveled.

Ahead, the thin man in the blue mantle,
silent and anxious, staring straight ahead.
His stride gobbling up the path with big,
un-chewed bites, his fists hanging clenched
and heavy from the folds of his falling cloak.
He could no longer comprehend the effortless lyre,
that had grown around his left arm like a rose
vine in the branches of an olive tree.
It was as if his senses were cut in two.
His eyesight ran ahead of him like a dog that
turns around, comes back and runs away again
to stand guard at the next blind turn -
while his hearing lingered like a scent.
Sometimes it seemed to reach back to travel

with those other two who were supposed
to be following this entire ascension.
Then, again, it was only his climb's after-ring
and the wind in his cloak that followed him.
And he assured himself: Yes, they're coming.
Said it out loud and heard it echo. Yes.

They were coming. Only how could two people
move without sound? If he could permit himself -
and wouldn't just that one backward look
wreck the entire creation, so close to completion?
- to turn just once, he would certainly see them,
the two weightless beings, who quietly followed him:

That god of errands and messages from afar,
the traveling hood covering his brilliant eyes,
the thin rod held out in front of his body,
wings beating above his heels,
and his left hand held out to - *Her*.

The one so beloved that from one lyre
more grief came than from all grieving-women,
so that a whole world was made of grief
and everything was re-created:
Forest and valley and road and village,
field and river and beast.
And around this other world,
another sun traveled through a star-filled
silent sky. A grieving sky with grimacing stars.
She was so beloved.

But, now, she went on the arm of the god,
her pace impeded by the long burial shroud,
uncertain, meek and without impatience.
She was self contained, like someone with higher hopes,
and didn't think about the man who walked ahead
or the path, that climbed back into life.
She was self contained. And being dead
enriched her like a treasure.
Like a fruit full of dark sugar, she was filled
with a death so immense and new
she couldn't quite grasp her role in it.

She'd come into a new childhood
and must not be touched. Her sex
had closed like a young flower at evening,
and her fingertips were so weaned from marriage
that even the gentle god's, infinitely gentle,
guiding hand sickened her with unwelcome intimacy.

She was now, no longer that blonde wife
who in the poet's song once rang and rang.
No longer the wide bed's perfumed and blessed
isle. That man's property, no longer.

She had already come undone like long hair,
and had been surrendered like a rainfall,
given away in a hundred portions.
She was root now.

And when suddenly, abruptly,
the god stopped her - and sadly exclaimed
the surprising words: He's turned around.
She didn't comprehend, just quietly asked: *Who?*

But some way off, dark in the clear exit,
someone - it could have been anyone- stood,
the one whose face could no longer be recognized.
He stood and watched how on a strip of meadow-path
with a sorrowful expression, the god of messages
silently turned to follow the retreating shape,
her pace impeded by the long burial shroud,
uncertain, meek and without impatience.

1904 (from *Neue Gedichte*)

From the Sonnets to Orpheus (1922)

Sonnet #8 : 2

So few: My onetime childhood playmates
in those various city parks. The way
we found and hesitantly liked each other.
And like the little lamb with the talking scroll,

spoke without speaking. Those times we just
exulted - no one of us owned that. Who could?
Or the ways it all fell apart amid the strolling people
and the frightening, slow passing year.

Carriages rolled by, alien, drawn along.
The houses surrounding us were solid but lies.
And no one knew us at all. Was anything real?

Nothing. Just the balls in the air and their masterful arches.
Not even the children... But sometimes, one ...ah, where
has he vanished? ...managed to step under that falling ball.

in memoriam, Egon von Rilke

Sonnet # 9 : 2

Judges, don't congratulate yourselves for dispensing
with the rack and the iron collar. Your hearts
haven't made any progress just because
a calculated twinge of mercy makes you grimace.

What it received over time, the scaffold will again
serve up, the way children rediscover
the toys of forgotten birthdays. The god of genuine
mercy would stroll into a pure, lofty, welcoming

heart differently. He'd arrive in a rush of gripping radiance
and bind us to himself, an irresistible divinity.
More than a gale to rock the big unsinkable boats.

Nothing less than the secret sweet recognition
that wordlessly conquers from within
like the quietly playing child of an eternal coupling.

Sonnet #11 : 2

Roaming, conquering humanity has quietly plotted many a deadly ruse in the persistent discipline of the hunt. And no trap or snare more cunning than you - the strip of sailcloth I once saw lowered into the limestone bird grottoes of Slovenia.

They ever so gently slipped you in as if you were a flag of truce to cheer. Then, the attendant snapped a corner. And out of the cavernous night a handful of frenzied gray doves fluttered into daylight to be shot.

But even *this* is just.

Not the slightest twinge of pity even touches the onlookers, let alone the hunter who vigilantly dispatches his efficient, businesslike task.

Killing is another face of our migratory mourning.
Innocently smiling
at what's happened to us.

Sonnet # 12 : 2

Embrace change. Let yourself be inspired by the very fires
that consume you with their sparkling transformations.
The spirit of renunciation that masters this mortal life ignores
the swinging figure's ups and downs, but loves the turning point.

What's locked in place is numb and congealed.
Are you safe, under that dull gray shell? Just wait:
From somewhere, something even harder warns the petrified
of pain on the way. As a forgotten hammer is poised.

But what about someone who flows from himself like a spring?
Enlightenment enlightens him as she leads him laughing through giddy
scenarios, where beginnings may end but endings bring beginning.

They're astonished at how every fortunate place their travels find
is the child or grandchild of a loss. And shape shifting Daphne, as she
feels herself becoming laurel, whispers - I want you to change into wind.

Sonnet #13: 2

Anticipate each goodbye, as if it were
already behind you like a winter that's passed.
Because underneath these winters is such an interminable
winter, that only by hibernating can your heart survive.

Always be dead in Eurydice - climb out the way a singer climbs,
in a voice rich with loss and celebration of that pure connection.
And here, below with the ghosts, in the empire of bitter endings,
be the clinking glass that, even as it shatters, rings.

Be - and at the same time - realize your inescapable non-existence
is the unquenchable root of your deepest resonance.
And just this once, be all you were meant to become:

To those already used and discarded, and to the numb, mute
stockyard of bloated nature - to that unspeakable sum -
count yourself gladly in and nullify the count.

Sonnet # 14: 2

Look at the wildflowers, rooted in their own mortality. We lend them purpose from beyond their purpose. Who knows if they resent their withering - or whether it's for us to be their regret?

Everything wants to float. And we go around depressed, depressing everything - enthralled with gravity. What exhausting taskmasters we've become to the eternal childhood of blossoms in their dreams.

If someone, somehow took them into intimate sleep and slept deeply with them - Oh, how easily he'd awaken - new to a new day, out the communal deep.

Or perhaps he'd stay there and they'd bloom with praise for this convert, now just one of them, the quiet brothers and sisters of the meadow breeze

Afterword: Orpheus, Early and Later

Rilke, in the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, addresses Orpheus as the prototype lyric poet. But Orpheus first appears in Rilke, much earlier, in the *Neue Gedichte*, as the husband of Eurydice, who negotiated her return from death with a love song. And who failed her at the last moment - violating the condition of her release by turning back to look at her just before she'd finally emerged from the underworld.

That poem - *Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes* - was written in 1904. Inspired, according to the Rilke biographer Leppman, by a sculpture. Rilke was 28 when he wrote the poem, traveling in Rome with his wife, their two year old marriage already tenuous. Eighteen years later, in 1922, he returned to the Orpheus & Eurydice myth in the *Sonnets to Orpheus* - most explicitly in Sonnet 13:2. That sonnet is a related, but much different poem, a culmination of the 1904 Orpheus narrative transferred from the mythic to the personal.

As with Lot's wife, we've been left to wonder for thousands of years just why Orpheus turned around. With no clear answer. But that doesn't stop each of us from offering our own explanation. In Rilke's 1904 poem, Orpheus, although the son of a god, turns because he's all too human.

As he climbs the strange mine-shaft of souls, Orpheus' anxious humanity overwhelms him to the point that the divine gift of song he used to persuade the god of the dead is no longer meaningful to him. And the simple, seemingly meaningless, condition placed on Eurydice's rite of passage becomes - simply impossible. Eurydice, who died because she was mortal, can't be restored to life even by the gods, because Orpheus, the instrument of her redemption, is also human.

The 1922 poem (#13:2) begins at the point the 1904 poem ends. Except that Orpheus is no longer only a mythical figure - but a persona for Rilke the poet and man. And, because the poem draws on deep human roots, a persona for the reader as well.

In the Orpheus Sonnets, Rilke works at the seams and the edges - the sun flecked places in clouds where rain appears. Translating them you're aware of a sense of the not quite there, of images as ephemeral as smoke signals, the uneasy feeling that reality is just one face of things. And that on the indivisible continuum of time, even as we live, we're already dead.

After learning that Vera Knoop, the 19 year girl who the Sonnets are dedicated to, had just died of leukemia - the same disease that killed Rilke only four years later - you wonder: Were the 55 Orpheus Sonnets, which came all in a rush to Rilke in the space of a few weeks, the final flowering? Signals from the disease still latent, but beginning to stir in his blood?

In that sense the Sonnets are not only rich with death, but rich with Rilke's own, still unsuspected but imminent, death. How can a reader, much less a translator, be unaware of that weight about to fall? And how does that effect the translation? For Rilke in the Sonnets, death and the dead seem like deep bass notes from an organ preparing to soar. At least so he hoped? Not the rumbling of a pitiless volcano... but the Minotaur's cold curious breath.

Art Beck