

FROM THE VISIONS OF CHRIST 31

THE ORPHAN

[A child who lost her mother reflects on the Christian hope with Jesus and receives no reply.]

.....

The child looks up, and leaves her thoughts behind:
Spring waits for her with flowers of every kind;
and as it is in that mysterious story
of red hoards guarded by the brown dwarf-people,
there is real gold atop the prayer-house steeple.
God's universe is, after all, a glory -
and new, as if He'd made it overnight.
The child rejoices - and she laughs outright.
But look: stock-still against the churchyard wall,
a man who seems to have no strength at all
is leaning; in his great, dark eyes are fed
the fires of grief, like candles for the dead.
Rustic his clothing, of a coarse gray thread;
he claws his wild hair with a wandering hand
and stares, quite lost, toward the mountain's rand
as if with pinions quietly outspread
his spirit readies for that other land..

Childishly she comes skipping alongside
and gapes at him with eyes grown question-wide;
and innocently then her words ring out:
"You, stranger, what are you so sad about, -
is it because your mother, too, has died?"
He doesn't hear. With eye still fixed intently
on miracles, he merely murmurs gently,
vexed to have been disturbed - like a sage brooding,
upon whose sphere an upstart is intruding:
"Go home to mother; go, my dear."

At this the child recoils: "You didn't hear?
I said I've lost her." "So," a stolid nod,
"She's buried?" On the young one's brow he lays
a heavy hand and in a trance he prays:
Lightly upon your mother lie the sod!

The child is fearful, as she was before.
A savage grief gnaws at her heart once more;
she sidles closer to the man in gray:
"Isn't it so - the priest says she and I -
you know it too - will meet in heaven some day?"
Her words drift off; there comes a cricket-cry;
she harks: a dainty whiteness flutters by;

³¹. Rainer Maria Rilke: *Visions of Christ: A Posthumous Cycle of Poems*, edited, with an introduction, by Siegfried Mandel, poems translated by Aaron Kramer, Boulder: U. of Colorado Press, 1967.

she harks; a shudder of smoke ascends the sky
from distant huts . . . The man makes no reply.

THE FAIR

[At the edge of a fair there is a stall marked "The story of Christ Jesus and His passion." Here a passion drama is played out.]

Both robbers glared at me with glassy eyes;
their foreheads glowed as waxen foreheads should -
and yet the eyes of Christ: gulf-deep, death-dark,
held such an eerie - almost living - spark,
that all my blood rushed hotly toward my heart:
the eyelids of the waxen God had been
opening wide, then shutting -- bluish-thin;
quietly rose, and quietly sank in
his slight, hurt chest; the pale lips came apart
as if to form a word that, sick with aching,
now forced its way through rows of ivory:
"Why has thou, oh my God, forsaken me?"
And as I heard him, by that dark word shaken,
that word whose meaning could not be mistaken
and stood, and stood, and nothing else could see, -
then lightly from the Crucifixion Tree
he loosed his white hands, groaning: "I am he."
I listened long, until the echo fled; -
I saw the walls, decked by a garish drape;
my fingers touched this waxen toy, the shape
which smelled of lamp-oil. Breathlessly he said:
"This is my curse. Since my disciples, led
to folly by vainglorious boasts of faith,
plundered my body from the pit of death,
there's been no place where I could lay my head.
As long as stars will find their brightness pearled
in every brook, as long as sunlight calls
the spring to come back with its bacchanals,
so long must I keep wandering through the world.
From rood to rood I travel, penance-bound:
once more - in bloody shoes - I seek the mound;
the agony of old returns to hound
and humble me; a nail grows from each wound;
the minutes fasten me unto the wood.

Thus ever dying, endlessly renewed,
I live: each day another cross to bear;
impaled here in the chill of churches, there
in the profane booth of a gaudy fair;
strengthless today, yet plied by sickening prayer;
strengthless tomorrow, mocked at everywhere;
strengthless forever in the morning gold
of crossroads just as in the chapel's cold.
I drive, a dying leaf, the wide world through.
You know the myth of the Eternal Jew?
I am myself that Ahasueras old
who dies each day, that each day he may live;

a dark, wide sea's my yearning; I can give
no coin to comfort it, not a tomorrow.
Thus they avenge themselves, who came to sorrow
through what I told them. Martyred for my sake,
an endless legion follows in my wake.
Listen! their tread! - the clamor that they make! ...

But no less mighty a revenge is mine:
I know the grapes are crushed at harvest-time
so that the burning juice of the red vine
may bring to men the joy for which they pine.
My blood keeps flowing from the wounds forever,
and all, believing that my blood is wine,
pour down their throats my venom and my fever ..."

.....

THE CHILDREN

[The returned Jesus meets a group of children who are lured by his promises, but he calls upon them to renounce this, and seek a real world and real life -- as it is.]

There stood amid the children of the neighborhood
a man. His garment was of modest wear,
and bright as home was his redeemer's-hair.
And just as on a day in early spring
the blossoms suddenly awakened, stare,
so had the children gathered, marveling
at him, whom none of the adults would dare
to name. But he is well-known to the young,
who crowd the gateway of the city's poor.
One of the swarm - a pale one - murmurs: "You're
the Mercy for whose sake my mother wrung
her hands." The words are tender on her tongue:
"Your home is in the sunset - am I right? ...
there, where the mountain-peaks are proud and bright.
To you the tree-tops nod; to you are sung
the windsongs; and you visit - like a friend -
good children in their dreams." At this they bend
like birches, all of them - the dark, the blonde -
before his smile - and the adults are stunned.
Unto his blessing, as if home were there,
come children scurrying from everywhere,
and all are listening. The word he brings
spreads over them the whiteness of its wings:
"Is there among you one who meditates
how hastily the soundless hours lead you,
how day by day and night by night they speed you
through thousand doorways and through thousand gates?
And all the hinges move just as they need to,
and all the doors fall softly into place;
your conscience and your comrade I remain,
although the journey ripens past my reign.
I am not life, and life is what you're after;
the darkness is your portion - I illumine;

'Renounce!' I cry - but you are lured by laughter;
you crave good fortune, and - my voice is doom."
He cased. The grownups listened from afar.
Then sighing, he continued. "When we are
balked at the border, don't abandon me.
You'll be too young to take me where you go;
but as you travel, turn back once to see:
perhaps in a poor place where flowers grow,
or in the tender smile of her who's been
a long time yearning, or perhaps within
an expectation: I am Memory,
and Childhood. Go - but as you seek strange lands,
turn back to offer me one final glance
already dipped in life from which the new
and never-prayed-to God holds out his hands.
Go on, then. There's a world awaiting you."

They hear, in haste, the promise he speaks;
warmer and warmer grow their cheeks"
"Shall we be pounding at the doors?!"
cries out a wild one in the throng -
cries out and anxiously implores:
"Through forest and flood, come speed us along!
And is the greatest door, the last,
soon to be passed?"

Thus, for the future the Master has vowed,
the eyes of that youngster boldly ignite;
and he blooms in the midday light.
But one, of that hushed and hearkening crowd,
lifts himself now, one child alone;
dishevelled and wilted his hair, wind-blown,
as over a helmet's rage still flies
proudly the torn prize.
The voice of this one flutters and begs"
"You!" He anxiously clasps his legs
with poor, starved hands: "You never
warned us, you never said
it would end forever!
Let the ungrateful gallop ahead
to years that the swiftest cannot recover -
I am different, different from these!"
And in a convulsion he clasps his knees. -

The lips of the radiant one, they quiver,
and he bends toward the weeping lad:
"Does mother give you games and food?"
Then into his lap sobs the boy:
"I'm too old for a toy."
"Does she bring you broth, fresh-brewed,
mornings when you wake?"
The lad has begun to quake:
"Too poor; I go unfed."
"Don't her kisses make
your cheeks sometimes turn red?"

Then he confesses: "Mother
has been a long time dead." ...
And the bright one's lips are unsteady
as leaves in autumn weather:
"Then you've *been* out in life already,
and now we can stay here together."

THE CHURCH OF NAGO

[Christ returns to his ruined church which has been turned into a manger.]

The villages are poor and small;
no exits or entrances at all;
just a few cottages that accost you
amid the May.
Would you bless them? Past you
they fall and away.
But before you the church-spire juts
high up into the evening air
as though earth herself had lifted a prayer,
a mighty prayer out of little huts.
This happened, though, in a bygone time:
lacking for care,
the steeple sank into ruin and grime;
the bell was lulled asleep by its chime -
no one was there.
Are the villages blind to the doors that beckon -
or do they pray in some other place?
Who needs an expensive mass? they reckon;
death comes in any case.
And so they let it rain on the vine
and on the roses they let it shine
and forget how to laugh and know not of weeping
and are yet in your keeping:
have they your grace?

First you wish to rest at your shrine;
then back to those who are truly religious
you shall come, bright, from the dusking ridges
with deeds divine.
And how to handle their grief, have you
been thinking?
Shall you lead from the vale young souls that are sinking,
onto the hills ere the sun wakes blinking,
and send their gaze from the summit, drinking
Lake Garda's blue?
Shall you push the peaks, like giants' pillows,
closer 'round this valley, to cheer
the spirits of the gray-haired fellows
with a cozier atmosphere?
For you've powers and possibilities,
and the things which stir at your summons
shall accompany you in your goings and comings
and build eager bridges over the seas
that came into being by your decrees. -

But today how faint you are!
Dusty now
your dress, your brow.
Have you come far?

"From sea to sea my pathway lies,"
he replies

"I have come to thee
from distant years.
And don't know how.

My woes, the white sisters, have taken me
tenderly into their midst ... Their tears
are falling now."

He ended.

And I heard them really moan
and saw how, slowly, from stone to stone
up toward his prayer-house he ascended.

No triumph splendid.

This was his homecoming, weary and sore,
who oft had strayed,
and would nevermore
herd sheep, and brotherhood darkly swore
to those in the shade.

But here it is, the house
to which in their trouble
the poor have long been bringing their hymns;
and here the strength surges back to his limbs,
and princely-appareled once more, as in dreams,
he seems
after brief slumber
to rouse
and rise from the rubble
and work his wonder.

The weary one gropes his way inside.
The church is black, and the darkness is small
and only slowly is magnified.
The lone one brings with him into the hall
eternity, and spreads it wide
with a holy sign -
live warmth from wall to wall
comes blowing through the shrine.
And now he perceives: the church had lied.
The alter has given way to a stall:
a new-built manger; three timid kine
crowd around the trough;
there's a hay-moist smell from the little straw bed.
And eternity, which he tried to spread
from wall to wall, is not enough,
becomes an eternity overawed:
because life is broad.
And the pale one stays alone at the rim,
kneeling.
And as if from a cradle there comes to him
a warm feeling.

And he is like an Orient king of yore -
but quite poor.

THE BOOK OF HOURS ³²



*Each becomming stands still .
My glances are ready, and as a bride
to each comes the thing it wills.*

³². Rainer Maria Rilke, *Das Stunden-Buch enthaltend die drei Bücher: Vom mönchischen Leben, Von der Pilgerschaft, Von der Armuth und vom Tode* (Leipzig, Insel-Verlag, 1931). The poems are translated by myself, unless otherwise noted.

The Book of Monastic Life

NOW BOWS THE HOUR³³

Now bows the hour
and wakens me
with clear, metallic strike:
my senses tremble. I feel: I can --
and grasp the maleable day.

Nothing is completed, before I behold it,
each becoming stands still.
My glances are ready, and as a bride
to each comes the thing it wills.

Nothing's too small for me, nor for my love;
I paint it upon gold and large
and hold it high, and know not
whose soul it may free.

YOU NEIGHBOR GOD³⁴

You Neighbor God, if oft I you disturb
with knocking loud, while long the night, -
it's only 'cause I seldom hear you breathe
and know: you are alone.
And if you something need, there's no one
there
to give your groping hand a drink:
always I hearken. Give a little sign.
I am quite near.

Only a slim wall's between us,
through fate; for it would only take
a call from you or me --
and it would break
with scarce a sound.
From your images it is built.

As names your images present you.
And if once that light within me flames,
with which my deeps perceive you,
it wastes itself upon their frames.
And my senses, which soon grow lame,
bereft of you are homeless.

IF ONLY FOR A MOMENT³⁵

If only for a moment stillness were complete.
If the accidental and imprecise

were stilled -- and the nearby laughing,
if the clamor of my senses
did not so much hinder my attention --

Then could I in thousand thoughts
think you, to your being's edge,
and possess you (only as long as a smile),
to gift you back to all of life
in thankfulness.

I READ IT IN YOUR WORD³⁶

I read it in your word,
the history of your gestures
by which your hands, warm and wise,
shaped and bounded Becoming.
You spoke loudly of life and softly of death
and repeated again and again the call to be.
Yet before the first death, murder came.
By this was rent your perfect circle
and there came a cry
which tore apart the voices
which had just gathered
to speak of you
to lift you up,
Bridge of every Abyss--

And what they since have stammered,
are fragments
of your ancient name.

I AM, O TIMID ONE³⁷

I am, O timid One. Don't you hear me
with all my senses surging toward you?
My feelings, which found flight,
Plainly circle your face.
Do you not see my soul, how it
stands close to you in silence dressed?
Does not my prayer grow ripe
upon your gaze as on a tree?

Even if you wish to wake, I am your intent
and grow strong with your glory
and become a silent star
o'er the wonderful city of time.

³³. Ibid., p. 7.

³⁴. Ibid., p. 9.

³⁵. Ibid., P. 9.

³⁶. Ibid. p. 10.

³⁷. Ibid. p. 16

MY LIFE IS NOT THIS BOLD HOUR³⁸

My life is not this bold hour,
in which you see me rush along.
I am a tree before my background,
I am but one of my many voices,
that one which soonest seeks silence.

I am the rest between two notes,
which poorly dwell together:
for death's note would ascend --

But in the dark interval, trembling,
both reconcile.

And the song is still beautiful.

IF I HAD GROWN SOMEWHERE³⁹

If I had grown somewhere,
where days are easier and hours, graceful,
I would have founded for you a great
festival,
and my hands would have held you,
not so tightly as they often have.

There I would have dared to squander you,
you boundless Presence.

As a ball
With waves of joy I would have
flung you, that one might catch
and leap, with hands upraised,
to catch your fall,
you thing of things.

I would have let you blaze
forth as a sword.
Upon most golden rings
I'd set your fire,
and have it dwell, for me,
on whitest hand.

I would have painted you: not on the wall,
but heaven itself, from edge to edge,
and would have you portrayed, as a giant would,
as mountain, as fire,
as simoon, growing in the desert -
or
it can even be: I found
you once ...

My friends are far away,
I scarcely hear their laughter still;
and you: you've fallen from the nest
a fledgling bird with yellow claws
and largest eyes : for you I grieve.
(My hand is much too broad for you.)
Upon my finger from out the well I lift a
drop
and watch, whether you in thirst might reach,
and feel your heart and mine to beat,
and both in fear.

I FIND YOU IN ALL⁴⁰

I find You in all these things
to which I am kind and kin;
As a seed You are seen in the humble
and in the great You generously give
yourself.

That is the wonderful playfulness of power,
that it passes so humbly through things:
developing in roots, disappearing in trunks
and emerging in treetops as a resurrection.

WORKERS ARE WE⁴¹

Workers are we: apprentices, journeymen, masters,
and we build you, you towering nave.
And often there comes an earnest "visitor,"
traveling through our hundred minds,
as a gleam of light,
and shows us, trembling, a new skill.

We climb the rocking scaffold,
in our hands heavily hangs the hammer,
until a moment kisses our foreheads,
a moment which streams from you as the wind from
the sea,
a moment which seems to know all.

³⁸. Ibid. p. 16.

³⁹. Ibid. p. 17.

⁴⁰. Ibid. p. 18.

⁴¹. Ibid. p. 20.

and through the mountains echo blow upon
blow.

Only at dusk do we give you up:
and your developing contours dawn.

God, you are great.

WHAT WILL YOU DO, GOD?⁴²

What will you do, God, when I die?
When I, your pitcher, broken, lie?
When I, your drink, go stale or dry?
I am your garb, the trade you ply,
you lose your meaning, losing me.

Homeless without me, you will be
robbed of your welcome, warm and sweet.
I am your sandals: your tired feet
will wander bare for want of me.

Your mighty cloak will fall away.
Your glance that on my cheek was laid
and pillowed warm, will seek, dismayed,
the comfort that I offered once -
to lie, as sunset colors fade
in the cold lap of alien stones.

What will you do, God? I am afraid.⁴³

YOUR FIRST WORD WAS: LIGHT⁴⁴

Your first word was: light:
there time was born. Then silence, long silence.
Your second word became man, fearfully,
(we still dwell in the darkness of its sound),
and again you grew reflective.

I do not wish your third.

At night I often pray: be the Silent One,
who's increasingly confined to gestures,
whose spirit moves in dreams,
whose heavy sum of silence's
inscribed on mind and mount.

Be the shelter from the passion
which would violate the inexpressible.
Night has come in paradise:

be the shepherd with the horn,
that all that may be said would be: he blew.

LOUDLY GLARES THE LIGHT⁴⁵

Loudly glares the light atop your tree,
and makes for you all things both bright and
vain;
until they find their way to you when day
does fade.

Twilight, the tenderness of space,
lays thousand hands upon a thousand hills,
and under them the strange becomes devout.

You would no other way embrace the world
than this, with gestures tenderest.
From heaven you touch the earth;
beneath your mantel's folds it comes alive.

You have so gentle a way.
And those, who loudly call your names,
already forget your nearness.
From your hands, lifted like mountains,
soars your quiet power from their dark brow
to give the meaning of what we sense.

The Book of Pilgrimage

EXTINGUISH MY EYES⁴⁶

Extinguish my eyes: I can see you,
make me deaf: I can hear you;
without feet can I approach you,
without mouth can I implore you.
Break my arms, I will hold you
with my heart as with a hand,
stop my heart, my brain will beat,
and if a burning brand into my brain you
cast,
still in my blood I'll bear you.

ALTHOUGH AS FROM A PRISON⁴⁷

Although, as from a prison walled with hate,
each from his own self labors to be free,
the world yet holds a wonder, and how great!
ALL LIFE IS LIVED: now this comes home
to me.

But who then lives it? Things that patiently
stand there, like some unfingered melody

⁴². Ibid. p. 26.

⁴³. Using the translation of Deutsch, Babette, Transl.,
Poems from the Book of Hours, "Das Stundenbuch",
Norfolk, CN." New Directions, 1941, p. 29.

⁴⁴. Op. cit., p. 31.

⁴⁵. Ibid. p. 46.

⁴⁶. Ibid. p. 58.

⁴⁷. Ibid. p. 61.

sleeping within a harp as day is going?
Is it the winds across the waters blowing,
is it the branches beckoning each to each,
is it the flowers weaving fragrances,
the ageing alleys stretching endlessly?
Is it the warm beast moving to and fro,
the birds in alien flight that sail from view?
This life -- who lives it really? God, do
you?⁴⁸

YOU ARE THE FUTURE⁴⁹

You are the future, the magnificent dawn
over the plains of eternity.
You are the cock-crow after the night of
time,
the dew, the morning matins and the maid,
the stranger, the mother and death.

You are the evolving form,
which emerges only from fate,
which remains uncelebrated and
unlabeled,
as little to be described as a wild woods.

You are the inherent meaning of things,
about whose nature the last word falls into
silence
and always shows itself otherwise to others:
to the ship as harbor and to the land as ship.

THE KINGS OF THE WORLD ARE OLD⁵⁰

The kings of the world are old
and will have no heirs.
Their sons have died as children
and their pale daughters surrendered
the feeble crowns of power.
The mob breaks them to small coins
which the present lord of the world
forged with fire into machines
which sullenly serve his will;
but fate is not with these.
The ore longs for home. And it will
to desert the coins and wheels
which teach it of so meagre a life.
And from factories and coffers
it will again to the veins

of gaping mountains return,
which close behind it.

ALL WILL AGAIN BE GREAT⁵¹

All will again be great and powerful,
the land, simple, and the water, flowing,
the trees gigantic and very small the walls;
and in the valleys strong and varied,
a people of shepherds and farmers.

And no churches which surround God
as a fugitive and then bewail him
as a captured and wounded animal, --
houses friendly to all who ask entrance
and a feeling for limitless sacrifice
in all actions, and in you and me.

No waiting the beyond, no looking above,
only longing not to profane even death,
and as a servant to practice earthiness,
to no longer feel strange in earth's hands.

ALREADY THE RED BARBERRIES⁵²

Already the red barberries ripen,
aging asters breathe weak in their bed.
Who is not yet rich when summer passes,
will wait ever and never possess himself.

Who cannot now close his eyes,
certain that a flood of visions
only awaits in him, until night begins,
that they might arise in his darkness; -
he has ceased to live and is old.

To him nothing more comes, to him no day
approaches,
and all deceives him which to him happens;
even you, my God. And as a stone are you,
which daily drags him into the depths.

DON'T BE ANXIOUS, GOD⁵³

Don't be anxious, God. They say "mine"
to all things which are patient.
They are as the wind which brushes the
branches
and says "my tree."

⁴⁸. Deutsch, Babette, p. 35. What seems to be some errors
in the text are corrected.

⁴⁹. Op cit., p. 69.

⁵⁰. Ibid. p. 71.

⁵¹. Ibid. p. 71.

⁵². Ibid. p. 78.

⁵³. Ibid. p. 78.

They scarcely notice
how all glows which their hands seize, --
so that even by its utmost edge
they cannot hold it without being set aflame.

They say "mine" as often one desires to call
the prince "friend" in conversation with
 peasants
when the prince is very great and -- very far.
They say "mine" of walls not theirs
and know not at all the master of their house.
They say "mine" and name their possession
(when each thing withdraws as they
 approach),
as a tasteless charlatan perhaps
names the sun and lightning his.
So they say: my life, my wife,
my dog, my child, and know quite well
that all (life, wife, dog, and child)
are alien images for which they blindly
grobe with outstretched hands.
Certainty belongs only to the great who long for eyes.
For the others
do not want to hear that their poor wandering
gives them control over nothing,
that they, driven by their possessions,
not recognized by their own property,
as little possess their wives as their flowers
whose life belongs not to them but to all.

Do not lose your equilibrium, O God.
Even he who loves you and recognizes
your face in the darkness, when he wavers
as a candle in your breath, - he possesses you
 not.
And when one grasps you in the night,
so that you must come in his prayer:
 You are the guest
 who again departs.

Who can hold you, God? For you are yours,
by no owner's hand disturbed;
like wine not yet ripened,
which grows sweeter, belongs to itself.

The Book Of Poverty and Death

YOU MOUNTAIN⁵⁴

You mountain, who has endured since mountains
came to be, -
slope without huts, peak without names,

eternal snow, by which the stars are lamed,
and host to that valley of the Cyclamen,
from which all the earth's fragrance comes;
you, mouth and minaret of all the mountains
(from which no evening call resounds):

Do I exist in you now? Am I in basalt
a still undiscovered metal?
Fearfully I perceive you as stone
and everywhere I feel your hardness.

Or is that the anxiety which holds me fast?
the deep anxiety of cities grown too large
in which you've placed me to my chin.

O that you would have told the truth
about your being's illusion and paradox.
You persist, you storm from primal times,
and drive them as husks before you ...

And if you now wish of me some thing: so
 clearly speak, -
for I am no longer lord of my mouth,
which now seems more like a wound;
and my hands hang as hounds
at my side, too weak to respond to your call.

You force me, Lord, to a strange hour.

MAKE ME THE HERALD⁵⁵

Make me the herald of your plains,
make me a listener to your stone,
give me eyes to explore
your solitary sea;
let me accompany the course of your streams
as they roar in both directions
far into the sound of the night.
Send me to your desolate lands,
through which the far winds pass,
where great cloisters as garments
surround life not yet lived.
There will I consider myself
 among the pilgrims,
from their voices and ways
no longer separated by illusion,
and beyond a blind age
go the way which no one knows.

⁵⁴. Ibid. p. 83.

⁵⁵. Ibid. p. 84.

LORD, THE GREAT CITIES⁵⁶

Lord, the great cities are
lost and destroyed;
even the greatest flees before the flames, -
and there is no consolation to console,
and their brief time runs out.

There live men, live poor and burdened,
in deep rooms, afraid to produce,
more anxious than a young herd;
and outside wakes and breathes your earth,
but they live and know it no more.

There children grow up at window's ledge,
who ever in the same shadows are,
and know not that outside flowers call
to a day full of breadth, fortune, and blowing
wind, -
and they must be a child and sad.

There young women open to what's unknown
and long for their childhood peace;
but that's not there, for which they burn,
and trembling again they close themselves.
And they spend in hidden back rooms
the day of their emerging motherhood,
the long nights of unwilling moaning
and cold years without struggle and power.
And their death beds in darkness lie,
and slowly they come to long for that;
and slowly they die, die as in chains
and as a beggar depart.

THERE LIVE MEN⁵⁷

There live men, worn out, pale,
and they die in astonishing ways in the
difficult world.

And no one sees the gaping grimace,
into which the smile of a tender race
in nameless nights distorts itself.
They go through life devalued by their toil,
to serve senseless things without courage,
and their clothes hang limp upon them
and their beautiful hands age early.

The crowd presses upon them and think them not
worthy of care,
although they are withdrawn and weak, -

only shy dogs which have nowhere to live,
which follow them slowly for a while.

They go their way under a hundred torments
and, tormented by the blow of each hour,
they lonely surround the hospital
and anxiously await their admission.

There is death. Not that whose greeting
they in childhood wonderfully touched, -
the little death, as one there understands it;
their own hangs green and without sweetness
as a fruit in them which never ripens.

O Lord, give to each his own death,
the dying that grows from out his life
with its love, meaning and distress.

POVERTY

Poverty is a great glow from within.

THE HOUSE OF THE POOR⁵⁸

The house of the poor is as an altar shrine
in which the eternal transforms itself for
food,
and when evening comes, so slowly,
in full circle, it returns back to itself,
to itself slowly the whole night.
The house of the poor is as an altar shrine.

⁵⁶. Ibid. p. 84.

⁵⁷. Ibid. p. 85.

⁵⁸. Ibid. p. 99.

The house of the poor is as the hand of a
child.
It nothing takes which adults demand;
only a curd with decorated tongs,
the round stone which through the brook has
gone,
the sand which pours and a shell which
sounds;
it is as a scale so set
to respond to the slightest weight,
long fluctuating on its stand.

The house of the poor is as the hand of a
child.

And how the earth is the house of the poor:
The fragment of a future crystal,
sometimes shining, sometimes dark, in the
flight from its fate;
poor as the warm poverty of a stall,
and still there are evenings: then it is
everything,
and all the stars emerge from it.

THE LIFE OF MARY⁵⁹



BIRTH OF MARY

How much it must have cost the angels
not to break out singing, suddenly, as one breaks into tears,
since they well knew: on this night is born
the mother of the child, the One soon to appear.

In flight they keep silence and showed the way
where Joachim's lonely farm lay;
ah, they felt in themselves and in the air the anticipation,
but none was able to descend to it.

Both were already beside themselves from events transpiring.
A neighbor woman came, acted wise, but knew not how;
and the old man went carefully and stopped the mooing
of a dark cow. For such a time as this had never been.

⁵⁹ C.F. MacIntyre, translation and introduction, Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Life of the Virgin Mary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1947). The poems here are my translation from the German text included in this edition. It is only the "Rest on the Flight Into Egypt" and the last poem, on Mary's death, which I have omitted. This last poem is more traditional and deals extensively with Roman Catholic belief about the Assumption of Mary and her place in heaven. For me the "Consolation of Mary with the Resurrected Christ" is the appropriate conclusion, leaving open to mystery the future of their relationship and her role.

THE PRESENTATION OF MARY IN THE TEMPLE⁶⁰

To understand how she was then,
you must first call yourself to a place
where pillars appear within you; where you
can feel the steps, where arches full of danger
bridge the abyss of space
which exists in you because it was towered up
of such parts that no longer can you
remove them without destroying yourself.
You have gone so far that all in you is stone,
wall, stair, window, vaulting. So try
to draw apart a little, with both hands,
the great curtain which you have before you:
light shines from the heights
and overwhelms your breath and touch.
Above, below, palace looks upon palace,
balustrades broadly stream from balustrades
and emerge above to such heights
that you are dizzied by the sight.
Nearby a cloud emerges from the censers
which dims the near air; but that most distant
finds its way, streaming straight to you -,
and if now light from bright lamps play
on slowly approaching vestments:
how will you bear it?

But she came and raised
her glance to look upon this all.
(A child, a little girl among women.)
Then she calmly ascended, in confidence,
for the recognition already diminished by too much attention:
So truly was all that humans construct
already surpassed by the praise

in her heart. From the desire
to surrender to the inner signs:
her parents intended to present her,
the threatening one with the breast-plate of jewels⁶¹
apparently received her. Still she went through it all,
little as she was, letting go each hand,
moving into her destiny which, higher than the hall,
was already prepared, and more weighty than the temple.

ANNUNCIATION TO MARY⁶²

Not because an angel entered (know that)
was she afraid. As little as others, when

⁶⁰. Rilke here speaks of the way the impression of the Temple became interiorized . This is related to his understanding of how external reality is taken within the person and transformed within, to be loved and praised, to there continue to exist while externally it may perish.

⁶¹. The high priest with his breast-plate of jewels symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel.

⁶². Luke 1:26ff.

a sunbeam or the moon by night
creatively plays in their room,
are disturbed -, ought she be disturbed
at the form in which the angel comes;
she scarcely supposes that his presence
takes effort for an angel. (O if we knew
how pure she was. Has not a doe
which, lying, once saw her in the woods,
become so absorbed that
quite without coupling she gave the unicorn birth,
the animal born of light, the pure animal -.)⁶³

⁶³. The insertion of this interlude about the unicorn is strange. One must ask what it means. There were legends of which Rilke may have been aware that it was only a young virgin waiting alone in the woods who could capture a unicorn. However, this interlude has to do with the virginal birth of a unicorn from a doe who was absorbed in the purity of Mary. There is a reference to a unicorn in Rilke's Sonnets to Orpheus, II,4, which may be helpful, though written ten years later:

Oh this is the animal that never was.
They hadn't seen one; but just the same, they loved
its graceful movements, and the way it stood
looking at them calmly, with clear eyes.

It had not *been*. But for them, it appeared
in all its purity. They left space enough.
And in the space hollowed out by their love
it stood up all at once and didn't need

existence. They nourished it, not with grain,
but with the mere possibility of being.
And finally this gave it so much power

that from its forehead a horn grew. One horn.
It drew near to a virgin, white, gleaming--
and was, inside the mirror and in her.

Stephen Mitchell, ed. and translator, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1989, p. 241. The Sonnets to Orpheus are a series in commemoration of a friend's daughter who died, of whom Rilke says, "I will once more call up your image..." (I,25).

I would suggest that the use of the unicorn image has to do with the possibility of creating something within one's inner space which might not have external reality. Thus her inner purity absorbs the doe until it gives birth to an animal of the imagination, pure animal, beast of light. In a sense, this is the way Mary's child has been conceived. But here the image seems to be used another way. "what millions saw, did, suffered, entered them". All of human reality, quite real and not imaginary (but still needing to be imaged), for a moment in time enters not just Mary, but also the angel, and becomes part of their inner landscape. Thus in this moment in time Mary and the angel discover all of life and its possibility. Thus "they both tremble with fear."

Not that he entered, but that he approached;
the angel, with youthful countenance,
bowed so to her that his glance and that
with which she looked back so came together,
as if all beyond them suddenly vanished
and, what millions saw, did, suffered,
entered them (only she and he;
seeing and seen, eye to eye's welcome
nowhere else than in this place). See!
This is frightening. And they both tremble with fear.

Then the angel sings his melody.

MARY'S VISIT HOME⁶⁴

In the beginning she easily endured it,
while often in climbing she became
aware of her wonder-ful body -
and then she stood, breathing, upon the high

Judaeen hills. But it was not the land;
rather her fulness spread out around her.
Going she felt none could surpass
the greatness she now knew.

And she felt compelled to lay her hand
on the other body farther along.
And the women staggered towards each other
and touched garment and hair.⁶⁵

Each, full of her own sanctuary,
found refuge with her kin.
Ah, the Savior in her was still in bloom,
yet joy caused to leap
the Baptist in her cousin's womb.

JOSEPH'S SUSPICION⁶⁶

The angel spoke and troubled
the man who clenched his fists:
but don't you see in each fold of her robe
that she is pure as dawn?

But the other looked at him darkly,
murmuring only: What has changed her so?
Then cried the angel: carpenter,
have you not yet noticed that God has acted?

Because you make boards, in your pride,
will you really demand an answer from Him

⁶⁴. Luke 1:39ff.

⁶⁵. The meeting of Mary with Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist.

⁶⁶. Matt. 1:18ff.

who modestly from the same wood
brought forth the leaves and made the buds to swell.

He understood. And as he now raised
his frightened glance to the angel,
he was already gone. There he slowly removed
his heavy hat. Then sang he praise.

ANNUNCIATION ABOVE THE SHEPHERDS⁶⁷

Look up, you men. Men there about the fire
who know the heaven's expanse,
star-gazers, here! See, I am a new
ascending star. My whole being burns
and shines so strong and is so especially
full of light that the deep firmament
no more suffices. Let my radiance
enter your existence: O the dark look,
dark heart, night's fate,
that fill you. Shepherds, how alone
I am among you. Suddenly there's room for me.
Don't be amazed: the great bread-fruit tree
has cast a shadow. Yes, that came from me.
You, the unafraid, O know
how now upon your gazing faces
the future shines. In this strong light
much is to happen. You I trust
for you would keep silence. To you who simply believe
all here speaks. Fire and rain speaks,
the flight of birds, the wind and what you are,
none overcomes and grows fat on conceit. You should not hold
things within your breast
to trouble them. As his passion
through an angel streams, so through you courses
the earthly. And if a thornbush
suddenly flames, may from it
the Eternal call you; if cherubim
consent to pass near your flock,
don't be amazed:
throw yourselves upon your face,
pray and name this earth.

Still this was past.
Now should a new thing be,
from which the earth's circumference becomes broad.
What is a thornbush to us: God finds God's way,
into a virgin's womb. I who accompany you
am the bright sign of her innerness.

⁶⁷. Luke 2:8ff.

THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

Had you not simplicity, how should
this happen to you which now illumines the night?
See you, God who thunders above the peoples
becomes gentle and comes in you into the world.

Have you presented him as greater than you?

What is greatness? Straightway through all matter,
through which he passes, comes his true fate.
Even a star has no such path,
you see, these kings are great,

and they drag before you

treasures, which they held to be most precious,
and you're perhaps amazed at these gifts -
but see in the folds of your cloth,
how he now already surpasses all.

All amber, shipped from far,
each golden ornament and aromatic spices,
which pungent cast themselves upon your senses:
all this was quickly gone,
and in the end there was regret.

But (as you will see): he brings joy.

OF THE WEDDING AT CANA⁶⁸

Could she be other than proud of him
who for her made beautiful that most lowly?
Was not that high and celebrated night
beside itself when he appeared?

Did not that he was lost once⁶⁹
turn out to his glory in unanticipated ways?
Had not the wisest men ears
for mouths exchanged? And did not

the temple become a new place at his voice?
O certainly she had a hundred times
kept her joy in him from beaming forth.
In astonishment she followed him.

But at that marriage feast,
when there was unanticipated need of wine, -
she looked at him and asked a gesture
and did not understand that he refused.

⁶⁸. John 2:1ff.

⁶⁹. Luke 2:41ff.

And then he did it. She understood it later,
how she forced him on his way:
for now was he really a miracle-worker,
and the whole sacrifice was irresistibly determined.⁷⁰

Yes, it stood written.
But was it then already prepared?
She, she had brought it about
in the blindness of her vanity.

At the table full of fruit and greens
she rejoiced with the others and did not understand
that the water of her deep tears
had become blood with this wine.

BEFORE THE PASSION

If you had wished this, you would not have
needed to find your origin in a woman's body.
One must prospect for Saviours in the mountains,
where hard from hard is broken.

Do you not sorrow so to lay waste
your dear valley? See my weakness;
I have nothing but streams of milk and tears,
and you so deeply mattered.

With such eloquence you were promised me.
Why did you not leave my body as something wild?
If you only need a tiger to tear you apart,
why was I raised in the house of women,

to weave for you a soft, pure gown,
in which the least trace
of a seam does not press you-: so was my whole life,
and now you suddenly change its nature.

PIETA⁷¹

Now is my misery complete, and namelessly
it fills me. I am numb,
as stone within is numb.
Hard as I am, I know only one thing:
You became great,
... and you became great,
in order that, as a pain too great,

⁷⁰. Rilke's feeling that Mary was partially responsible for forcing Jesus into his mission seems to be a reflection of his relationship with his own mother who tried to force upon him her expectations and traditional Catholic piety. This struggle appears at a number of points in his writing. That Jesus was forced into becoming a miracle worker instead of coming to terms with real life is treated extensively in his "Visions of Christ", composed 1896-98, which were so critical of traditional Christianity that these poems were not published until after his death.

⁷¹. According to John 19:25-27, Jesus mother was present at the crucifixion. The story of her receiving the body develops from that.

you might completely exceed my heart's grasp.
Now you lie across my womb;
I can no longer grant you birth.

THE CONSOLATION OF MARY WITH THE RESURRECTED CHRIST⁷²

What they then experienced, is it not
sweet above all secrets
and still quite earthly:
there he, a little pale still from the grave,
disburdened stepped towards her,
resurrected in every way.
O, to her first. How they were there,
beyond description, in healing.
Yes, they were healing; that was it. They had no need
to boldly touch.
For scarcely a moment
he laid his almost
eternal hand upon her womanly shoulder.
And they began,
silently as the trees in spring,
infinitely together
this season
of their deepest communion.

⁷². Though the women went to the tomb on Easter morning, Jesus mother is not specifically mentioned as one who was there. John 20 includes a first appearance to Mary Magdalene. Matt. 28 mentions the presence of Mary Magdalene at the tomb and "the other Mary", to whom Jesus does then appear. There is one more poem in the series beyond this one, dealing with the death of Mary in traditional terms. It is my preference to conclude the series with "The Consolation".