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Four Poems by Rainer Maria Rilke

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Four Poems by Rainer Maria Rilke

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Blind Man

Paris

Der Blinde

Look: he walks and interrupts the town,
which is not present on his darkened stage,
the way a darker fissure stretches down
through a bright cup. As if upon a page,

there's painted on him only the reflection
of things; he can't receive it. Nothing but
his sense of feeling stirs, as if it caught
the world in little ripples of perception—

a stillness, a resistance—whereupon he
seems to await the one he'll choose: he stands,
devout, and almost gravely lifts his hand,
as if to give himself in matrimony.

The Donor

Der Stifter

That was the order to the painters' guild.
Perhaps he never saw the Lord appear;
perhaps no bishop, too, saintly and mild,
stepped up, as in this picture, to his side
and lightly laid his hand upon him there.

Perhaps this was the whole of it: to kneel
like that (just as it's all that we have learned);
to kneel, to keep the contours of one's soul,
which want to burgeon outward, tightly reined
within one's heart, like horses kept in hand.

So if something uncanny should occur,
something not promised and not written down,
we could have hope it wouldn't see us here
and would draw nearer, then completely near,
rapt and absorbed in matters of its own.

The Arrival

Did the coach's turning spark this energy?
Or was its source the gaze that caught and held
baroque stone angels, filled with memory,
standing among the bluebells in the field,

then left them, as the park of the estate
pressed nearer, closing in around the drive,
brushing against it, leaning from above,
then suddenly let go, for here was the gate,

which, as if having called to it, now forced
the house's long façade to rotate there
and afterwards stand still. Down the glass door

a gliding motion flashed, and a greyhound pressed
forward through its opening, and bore
its thin flanks down the shallow flight of stairs.

Die Anfahrt

Lady on a Balcony

Dame auf einem Balkon

She suddenly emerges, wrapped in the wind,
brightly into brightness, singled out,
while now the room, as if cut down to fit,
is filling up the door behind,

dark as a cameo's background, which lets through
a shimmering round its boundaries, and you
believe it wasn't evening there until
she stepped outside and on the outer rail

laid just a little of her, just her hands,
to be completely light: as if from the rows
of houses she were held out to the skies,
to be enrapt by everything around.

Commentary

These four poems by Rilke from his *New Poems* all deal with vision, from the blind man's lack of sight (and the way he compensates for it), to the donor who may or may not have had the miraculous vision that he orders the painters' guild to portray, to the emotions generated by the sights of arriving at a beloved destination after an absence, to the woman whose stepping out onto a balcony to look around is itself a vision to the one who witnesses it. In these "thing poems," Rilke uses the outward details of the appearance of things to unlock their emotional resonances. Each of the scenes he portrays is a meditation piece: the more closely he looks at the world, the more rapturously he is taken beyond it.

The spells of these poems gain force from the pulse of the meter and the melody of the rhymes, so I have tried to imitate both in my translation. However, I have had to make some changes to keep the translations as accurate as possible and to make them sound natural and lyrical in English. Although I have made every line rhyme with another, as Rilke does, and have tried to preserve the same number of stresses in each line's meter, I have had to resort to some slant rhymes and slight changes of rhyme schemes to do so. Also, whereas Rilke writes some poems in iambic meter and some in trochaic meter, trochaic meter is rarer in English poetry, and calls attention to itself as sounding odd and chant-like, so I have switched those poems to the more common and colloquial iambic meter.

Source texts:

Rilke, Rainer Maria. "Die Anfahrt." <http://rainer-maria-rilke.de/090079dieanfahrt.html>

----- "Der Blinde." <http://rainer-maria-rilke.de/090040derblinde.html>

----- "Dame auf einem Balkon." <http://rainer-maria-rilke.de/090068dameaufeinembalkon.html>

----- "Der Stifter." <http://rainer-maria-rilke.de/080031derstifter.html>