

Rainer Maria Rilke
Fifth Duino Elegy¹

Dedicated to Frau Hertha Koenig²

But tell me, who *are* they, these travellers, even a little
more fleeting than we ourselves, - so urgently, ever since childhood,
wrung by an (oh, for the sake of whom?)
never-contented will? That keeps on wringing them,
bending them, slinging them, swinging them,
throwing them and catching them back: as though from an oily,
smoother air, they come down on the threadbare
carpet, thinned by their everlasting
upspringing, this carpet forlornly
lost in the cosmos.

Laid on like a plaster, as though the suburban sky
had injured the earth there.

And hardly there,
upright, shown us: the great initial
letter of Thereeness, – than even the strongest
men are rolled once more, in sport, by the ever-
returning grasp, as once by Augustus the Strong
a tin platter at table.

Alas, and round this
centre the rose of onlooking
blooms and unblossoms. Round this
pestle, this pistil, caught by its own
dust-pollen, and fertilised over again
to a sham-fruit of boredom, their own never-
realised, so thin-surfacedly gleaming,

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke. *Selected Works, volume II, Poetry*, translated by J.B. Leishman, London: The Hogarth Press, 1967, pp. 234-236.

² This Elegy was largely inspired by recollections both of Picasso's painting *Les Saltimbanques*, the property of Frau Hertha Koenig, in whose house in Munich Rilke had lived with in from June till October 1915, and also of the real *saltimbanques*, who had meant so much to him during his years in Paris.

lightly sham-smiling boredom.
There, the withered wrinkled lifter,
old now and only drumming,
shrivelled up in his massive hide as though it had once contained
two men, and one were already
lying in the churchyard, and this one here had survived him,
deaf and sometimes a little
lost in his widowed skin.

And the youngster, the man, like the son of a neck
and a nun: so tautly and smartly filled
with muscle and simpleness.

O you,³
a pain that was still quite small
received as a plaything once in one of its
long convalescences

You,⁴ that fall with the thud
only fruits know, unripe,
daily a hundred times from the tree
of mutually built up motion (the tree that, swifter than water,
has spring and summer and autumn in so many minutes),
fall and rebound on the grave:
sometimes, in half-pauses, a tenderness tries
to steal out over your face to your seldomly
tender mother, but scatters over your body,
whose surface quickly absorbs the timidly rippling,
hardly attempted look ... And again
that man is clapping his hands for the downward spring, and before
a single pain has got within range of your ever-
galloping heart, comes the tingling
in the soles of your feet, ahead of the spring that it springs from,
chasing into your eyes a few physical tears.

³ Addressed to the whole group of 'travellers'.

⁴ Addressed to the youngest of them, a little boy.

And still, all instinctive,
that smile
Angel! oh, take it, pluck it, that small-flowered herb of healing!
Get a vase to preserve it. Set it among those joys
not yet open to us: in a graceful urn
praise it, with florally soaring inscription:

'Subrisio Saltat.'. ⁵

Then you, my darling,⁶
mutely elided
by all the most exquisite joys. Perhaps
your frills are happy on your behalf, –
or over your tight young breasts
the green metallic silk
feels itself endlessly spoilt and in need of nothing.
You,
time after time, upon all of the quivering scale-pans of balance
freshly laid fruit of serenity,
publicly shown among shoulders.

Where, oh, where in the world is that place in my heart
where they still were far from being *able*, still fell away
from each other like mounting animals, not yet
ready for pairing; -
where weights are still heavy,
and hoops still stagger
away from their vainly
twirling sticks?

And then, in this wearisome nowhere, all of a sudden,
the ineffable spot where the pure too-little
incomprehensibly changes, veering
into that empty too-much?
Where the many-digitated sum
solves into zero?

⁵ Abbreviated Latin (as on a chemist's jar) for *Subrisia Saltatoris*, 'acrobat's smile'.

⁶ Addressed to the little boy's sister.

Squares, 0 square in Paris, infinite show-place,
where the modiste Madame Lamort
winds and binds the restless ways of the world,
those endless ribbons, to ever-new
creations of bow, frill, flower, cockade and fruit,
all falsely coloured, to deck
the cheap winter-hats of Fate.

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Angel: suppose there's a place we know nothing about, and there,
on some indescribable carpet, lovers showed all that here
they're for ever unable to manage – their daring
lofty figures of heart-flight,
their towers of pleasure, their ladders,
long since, where ground never was, just quiveringly propped
by each other, – were able to manage it there,
before the ringed onlookers there, countless un murmuring dead:
would not those then fling their last, their for ever reserved,
ever-concealed, unknown to us, ever-valid
coins of happiness down before the at last
truthfully smiling pair on the quietened
carpet?