

# Lessons With Rilke

By Matthew James Friday



## Acknowledgements

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Rilke sources are:

1. Letters to a Young Poet, 2014. Translated by Reginald Snell
2. A Year With Rilke, Marc, J & Barrows,
3. The Rilke Foundation in Sierre, Switzerland
4. Raron Church Museum, Switzerland
5. The Sonnets to Orpheus. ([www.sonnetstoorpheus.com](http://www.sonnetstoorpheus.com)) Translated by Robert Temple.

*May what I do flow from me like a river,  
no forcing and no holding back,  
the way it is with children.*

Rilke (2)

*For all living things in nature must unfold in their particular way and become themselves at any cost and despite all opposition. Rilke (1)*

## Hurry On

Drifting the promenade of Desenzano Del Garda,  
admiring freshly fallen snow on the mountains  
that crown the pointed head of the Alpine lake.  
A building north wind promises in waves.  
Here is October tightening it's chilling dress.

We look down at the orange rock under our feet.  
Spun in the dark matter web of irregular lines  
a curling ammonite galaxy with ghostly white  
shell, a reminder of time flattened in plain sight.  
The shell spins and I hear the clocks ticking

trillions of divisions, turning rocks into sand,  
caterpillars into butterflies, the first hydrogen  
atoms into atomic bombs, my young parents  
into elderly people remembering their own  
parents this age, and me a once immortal boy

now a middle-aged facillime, puzzled at how  
quickly the sand runs. Now back on the promenade,  
marvelling at the fossil, pointing it out to friends  
who want to hurry on - *aperitivo* calling, snow  
falling, wine to be drunk, the absolute-zero of it all.

## March Moon

Bulging with new tides, birdsong,  
she sings in early evening skies,

A bucking hare in her marble eye  
encased with pale blue silk,

shielded by smoky clouds,  
she reminds you of orbs, discs,

the circular path that resists  
meandering, looking back,

reflecting. The reassurance of  
the return, older but constant.

*There, you have fashioned them a temple in their hearing. Rilke (5)*

## The Time of Owls

During the quickly darkening evenings  
and the reluctantly lit mornings of winter,  
a tawny owl is our companion. Never seen,

this night-ghost cloaks in the hint of trees  
that triangulates our block. From our third  
floor tree house, a tawny owl's call shrinks

space, turning everything tall into tree. Time  
reels back to boyhood; the thrill of sounds  
that scuffle in the dark foliage of ignorance.

The owl's hooting is strangely strained  
and fast, scared to reveal dusky secrets,  
not that misunderstood storybook hoot.

One February evening, a romance begins.  
Our guardian begins declaring darkness.  
A few moments later, a distant reply like

a rumour of the trees complaining of dusk.  
Over the next thirty minutes, her *too-wit*  
and his bold *too-woo* grow louder, closer

I live intensely on my balcony in between  
the lovers, hesitating to breath, conscious  
of the seconds being counted in feathers.

Almost exactly at eight: a flurry of calls,  
to summon that great milky eye witness  
from behind the eastern mountains.

By eight-thirty, the curtains close, applause.  
An exhausted silence and questions hang  
in the air, the moon demanding privacy.

## Good Friday Cuckoo

First to call news that morning,  
winter on the cross.

His words summoned others  
to witness frost on the nails.

His song is not clearly pronounced.  
Tired traveler from Africa

needs time to find the prayer.  
That evening, he winks passes

the balcony, afraid to be seen.  
Winter can always come back.

*See the flowers, so faithful to Earth.  
We know their fate because we share it. Rilke.(2)*

## **When The Flowers Return**

Those first snowdrops spearing coyly,  
the speckled smiles of daisies, winks  
of colour on leaf laden forest floors.

Seeing them you are suddenly relieved  
of your guilt: the thought that empty  
fields will harden, deadened skies

be your last mirror, the spindly creak  
of declining conversation, no summer  
to talk of. You can be rejuvenated again

and pretend Nature does this for you,  
that your witness is what gives worth,  
that a poem is what spring needs.

## April Dandelions

A field full of yellow dandelions,  
the bold, ignorant yellow of childhood.

Looking closer at the yellow-orange heart,  
studying the way sceptical adults do.

I spin in into the soothing centre,  
back in time to when I frolicked in fields

outside my home, the fields filled  
with nodding yellow greetings. Just weeds

the horticulture websites say, but no other  
weed was so plucked, painted, pressed.

Parachute seeds blown out of boyhood  
with wishes to wander where I am now.



*As long as we are here, and cousin to tree, flower, soil, may all that is near at hand be real to us and enter fully our awareness. Rilke (2)*

## **Italian Yggdrasil**

If Yggdrasil was Italianate  
it would be a stone pine tree,

that serene, elegant sentinel  
from Ticino to the tip of Italy's toe.

The long slender trunk an axis  
for the Mediterranean world to turn

slowly sunned under raised arms,  
pine palms held up and spread out

like Yggdrasil's Nine Worlds.  
Even in a haze, they are calm,

rarely stirred, anchoring Midgard  
in an evergreen goblet of wine.

Collected together, they crop night  
in thick boughs, calling out bats.

Each has its own serpent coiled  
around roots, sighing with pleasure.

## The Frog

With Venus winking  
at the pastelling sun,  
the mountains smudging,  
trees talking in shadows,

a frog sings  
down by the communal swimming pool  
recently cleaned of winter's  
green scumming by a robot.

A frog sings  
while children clatter in the distance,  
dragging dusk down an alley.  
A dog barking at the arriving

night. Still  
the frog sings  
the same frog  
that sang for Basho  
now sings for me.

The frog invisible  
singing by the swimming pool.  
I know what luck is.

*Nothing alien happens to us, but only what has long been our own. Rilke (1)*

## **Sunday Morning Miracle**

Stained window open.  
A robin hymns with early-spring enthusiasm.

I lay buried in a pillow,  
awake to revelation but eyes closed.

My saviour nuzzles into me.  
I rub the top of my feet on the sheet -

an innocent pleasure from my Eden days  
when Sunday mornings tasted

of the prayer that Monday would not come.  
For a few minutes, divine happiness,

a little miracle to keep the faith,  
a lesson for the god of labour and lessons.

## The Cuckoo Stopped Singing

Early July and I am stunned  
by the emptiness of the air.

I suddenly miss his bell ringing  
reminder that nature persists

despite our best efforts. He started  
in early May, that unmistakable

nursery rhyme song postering  
in the tree-dressed stage of our

Montagnola apartment block.  
He sang me back to boyhood,

to Epsom Common woods  
where cuckoos were a distant

promise of fleeting residency,  
the temporary in the seasons,

calling a partner in crime to lay  
an egg patterned with our nature,

displacing the righteous, leaving  
open mouths, always hungry.

Rightly secretive these tricksters,  
afraid to be uncloaked, the confidence

scam revealed. I caught a glimpse  
in late May as he bolted past, fleeing

to other haunts where I hear him:  
the High Alps, the lips of Italian lakes,

the confusions of teenage heat.  
He seems loudest in lazy mid-

summer evenings of exposed moons,

nostalgic pangs even before leaving.

Later in summer, I am saddened by  
the need to wait until another April.

*Want the change. Be inspired by the flame  
Where everything shines as it disappears.  
Rilke (2)*

## The Candle

Start with the flame,  
that beautiful spark  
of entropy proving itself,  
compounds combusting,  
changing solid wax to molten  
rivers that mourn, cool and harden,  
heaping new  
                    forms on old,  
re-creating but  
reducing,

all the while less and less,  
structured energy to heat loss.

As your candle burns up,  
taking years, if you are lucky  
enough to deny the 2nd Law,  
the lengthening yellow hand waves shadows  
on a white wall, while shadows that grow confident  
as the night darkens, softly dim.

All that fading, dissembling  
can be cheated  
a while,  
the brief  
breathe  
of  
a  
poem.

## The Bats

8.30pm. The sun is an orange memory  
in the west. The east pastels the rising  
evening. The last dusk choir is over  
and the trees silent with settling singers.  
Village lights jeweled mountain chests.  
The Evening Star winking permission.  
This is the in-between time claimed  
by the bats coming out to scout space,  
the birds shivering back onto branches.

From under darkly crested stone pines  
the bats shoots out, casting elastic lines  
down which they zag and twist to snag  
an invisible meal. Suddenly another blur  
of dark matter makes curves, winking  
wings flapping as fast as this evening  
dips into a softly dark night, the eye  
of Venus fluttering as four of them fill  
up the space, the blue leaking to black.

*In this place the earth tells her story  
to a sky full of attention.  
Rilke (1)*

## **Dream of Eagles**

Was it a golden eagle  
or the hope for an eagle  
that divided June with its glacial  
retreat to the mountain side.

I watched this unusual visitor  
and easily convinced myself  
that such wings belong to belief,  
that I am the blessed witness.

But perhaps I am just giving a kite  
an inflated ego. The possible-eagle  
disappeared into mountain  
myths we make when yearning.



## The Cherry Tree

We pick cherries from a tree in Unterbach.  
A silent local watches us, arms on hips,  
but there's no fence, just wild grass.

We pluck the cherries in bloody handfuls,  
warning each other about staining juice,  
giddy with the Biblical bounty. So many

clusters of fruit when you look up at the sky,  
red-shifting to purple stars. We only take  
a tiny portion of what the tree tempts.

The rest is left to hang too high, rot,  
or be gathered by the lucky locals,  
if they can take their hands off their hips.

*For the creative artist, there is no impoverishment and no worthless place. Rilke (1)*

## **Time Traveller in Sion**

Outside the Grand Cafe in Sion he rests,  
a Victorian artist from a Vallais art school,  
just up - afternoon coffee and custard pastry  
crumbs in his jaundiced beard, scattering  
down into his pyjamas, greying slippers.  
Dressed in questions, he has pan-pipes strung  
around his neck, and a Peruvian woven bag  
from which he fishes a notebook and pen  
to write or sketch in a shaking veined hand.  
He debates with himself, waves his hands  
at invisible members of his retinue, mumbles.  
Suddenly summoned by Rilke's angels, he gets  
up and leaves, stumbling back into the artwork  
he was trying to create out of his shadows.

## Feeding the Birds

He sits on a bench  
on the promenade at Morges,  
crumbling a croissant  
and flicking it towards  
the excited sparrows.

I watch him and remember  
feeding ducks as a kid,  
feeling life pulse in other beings,  
the sugary spill of pleasure,

how during the Lockdown  
I found solace in the business  
of blue tits, the chaffinch chick  
unafraid to linger on the balcony.

Now I watch the old man  
feeding the sparrows, feeling  
the life pulse in his hands,  
and I look down at my own hands.

*"I should prefer to be laid to rest in the lofty churchyard of the old Church of Raron. Its enclosure was one of the first places from which I experienced the wind and light of this landscape." Rilke (4)*

## **Between Being and Not Being**

We find Rilke facing south on the silent side of the St Romanus castle church, away from the tended family graves of those who lived decades longer than him. His has a rose, yes, but also a dead stick, weeds rife. Perhaps that suits the poet wondering about his place in the world, sculpting words from clouds and whispers, the dynamics of near death.

I think of those wild weeks in February, 1922, Orpheus singing in wildly strung winds, the ghost of Wera dancing in snowy whirls Eurydice's frozen cliff face beside the Rhone, that constant glacial urging of his angels and the mountains above, parting seas of clouds, then sinking back into your questions. Where better to demand a definition of life.

In the castle museum, the curator is keen to assure me that five francs is worth the visit, even with one room to you, all in German. I'm glad to visit, to see your face, those sad searching eyes that looked out of towers, seeing this valley as the art of light incarnate, finding spaces between being and not being, the angel and beast, the visible and invisible.

## Friend, the River

After visiting Rilke's grave in Raron,  
I haunt a shaded path, companion  
to the Rhone and its green-grey memory  
of minerals and ice, tiny waves tumbling  
with an urgency of a glacier unfolding,  
another freshly fallen artery blending  
too soon blue-grey. Rilke reassuring me  
that everything is related through the spirit  
of the river, always welcoming the listener.  
Isn't she urging you on, challenging stamina,  
fueling imagination? So too trees, mountains,  
the flowing swifts in the air - all friends  
to accompany you on your journey,  
mirror and merge with you, become you.

*Most experiences are unsayable; they come to fullness in a realm that words do not inhabit. Rilke (1)*

## **Writer's Block at Murren**

Words fail me.  
No, I fail words.

Empty dictionary.  
All synonyms are clichés.

Every time I pick an adjective  
to describe the mountains  
as they rise thousands of metres  
above the unparalleled U-shape valley of Lauterbrunnen  
my dumb pen is left sterile.

I am not the poet,  
the mountains are.  
Monch, Eiger, Jungfrau -  
your names are words enough.

No stanza here  
can capture this vista  
of monumental stone and glaciers, pristine  
alpine meadows, tiny towns perched at drunken angles.

I keep following the line of the cliffs,  
plunging down with the waterfalls, and all I can do is fall  
and accept the inadequacy of flesh  
and ink.

## On Not Having The Words

I don't have the words  
to narrate the mountains  
that cup Kandersteg and Oeschinensee.

Instead, I must cheer my failure

to compose sentences as layered  
as the sedimentary rocks, buckling  
under the pressure of tectonic metre.

Syntax stutters in this breathless act  
of stone sculpted by Deep Time, of peaks  
conducted to a music I can only hear

as a contemptuous rumbling. I  
can accept the insignificance of these stanzas  
if only the effort is acknowledged.

There's the ego of the flesh pressed  
in with the other gondola pilgrims:  
squirring push carts, hand-held tantrums,  
the barking and the coughing, hobbling  
last-timers, the indifferent cows by the lake  
tolerating selfies until new grass calls.

I know my place.

In the long line back to the gondola,  
few people wear masks. We fester.  
The mountains give a millenia-long shrug.

*And if what is of earth forgets you,  
Say to that earth of silence: I flow.  
Say to the rushing waters: I am.  
Rilke (5)*

## **In Lauterbrunnen with Tolkien**

1911. To be strolling with the young Tolkien, freshly fallen in Switzerland, marvelling at the wizardry of Nature, wandering the valley and its towering myth-made cliffs hiding secret havens, the gem of stories untold, those lofty beings dwelling in higher slopes, then rising above, the three Silmarils: Silverhorn, Rottalhorn and Jungfrau. To be there as his mind rings with the industry of Swiss engineers dwarfed by the drilling of the Jungfrau Railway through the Eiger. So many marvels. He saw snow, the cruelty of winter, the hunger in the higher ideals, the cascading laughter of giants, a world.



## 1922, Switzerland

I'd start at Lac Lemane and Lausanne  
having a drink with Elliot on the lake,  
talking about storms, Shelley's monstrous  
inspiration, the thunder in our heads.  
I'd insist he take a well earned break  
and visit castle Castle Chillon with me  
so we could see the romantic brutality  
Byron loved. A few essential editing tips  
then off to house hunt with Rilke  
in the Rhône valley. A bottle of Fendant  
and we'd talk about Orpheus, dead friends.  
I'd give him advice as a middle-aged poet,  
recommend he passes it on. Then off  
to Montagnola in Ticino, invited by Hesse,  
so we could compare notes on not fitting in.  
We'd go for a walk around glacial lakes,  
talk about the wisdom of trees. I'd introduce  
him to Buddhism and painting. Then a letter  
to Tolkien to remind him about Lauterbrunnen  
and those three mythical peaks above.  
I'd suggest to him 'Rivendell' and 'Moria'  
but not request any credit. My work  
complete, I'll take a first class train to Paris.

*Words even now go forth with tenderness into the inexpressible. Rilke (5)*

## **After Reading 'The Wasteland' by TS Elliot While In Lausanne**

I pour a glass of wine  
and imagine it blood,  
see vineyards suffocated  
by a smoggy *nebellio*  
the grapes ripen plastic,  
coughing Bacchus bowing  
as the earth heaves  
with tumouress cities,  
masked tourists stare  
into gawking screens,  
lakes bubbling with oil.  
COVID's voice temping  
us to ignore the invisible.

I can't compete for literary links.  
Something Shakespearian, perhaps.  
*Sans, sans, sans.*

## The Stork

A huge white question mark  
stalks a field outside Bassersdorf.

Black mourning tips folded back,  
a softly red bill probes the earth.

The legendary bringer of babies,  
your blessed image hangs above

those more fortunate doors.  
Ours creaked open a few times,

but you were always scared away  
by those sudden violent slams.

Still, it is great to tick you off  
my boyhood bird-watching list.

The boy gaups at your grandeur,  
but not the adult behind the door.

*Oh, the joys of travel! To feel the excitement of sudden departure, not always knowing whither. Rilke  
(2)*

## **The Return**

Arrive at Schynige Platte by train  
railway started in 1891 ahead alpine  
mountains still rising from continental  
crash course glaciers receding under  
an accelerated heat death sentence  
mineral grey glacial river surging  
down the Lutschental valley invisible  
virus moving so swiftly we need masks  
when pressed together Alpenhorn couple  
in traditional costumes saunter back  
to the station to greet arrivals notes  
bumping this vista green fields farmed  
for over a thousand years says a sign  
the constant of the cowbells blades of  
grass humming alpen garden coloured  
gift between the snow flowers nodding  
in a temperamental breeze tiny smokey  
cloud sneaking up on the Shilthorn  
on way to evaporated emptiness two  
swifts dance and dive across the skyline  
following the line of depth disappearing  
in darkened valleys reappearing framed  
by crumbled peaks of summer before  
they return to Africa sun creeping west  
light now eight minutes old shadow  
of a lamp to my right lengthening two  
paragliders clip thermals as they eagle  
the languages of all the passing tourists  
from skipping children to hobbling grand  
parents, striding backpackers and smoking  
train-trippers all impatient to return  
all will return in the end

## Summer Storm Over Interlaken

I watched the storm arrive  
through the rented apartment window,  
streaming blackness laced  
with cuts of white cloth.

At the Craft Beer Brew bar on the corner,  
stags raised their horns  
and bellowed at every stab of thunder.

In the street outside,  
dogs scurried and barked,  
kicking cans and howling.

A tomcat snuck over the apartment walls  
and stood in our balcony smoking,  
looking up and wincing.

I cuddled up against my wife,  
glad to have the wall and window,  
between us and the angry world.

Then the rain fell in such furious sheets  
that it quieted the stags, sent the dogs  
scurrying away, made the cat leap back

to his boundary. We threw open,  
and welcomed the water,  
the relief of all things made equal.

*Passionately we plunder the honey of the visible in order to gather it in the great golden hive of the invisible. Rilke (2)*

## **For Iris**

Winking from behind Jungfrau,  
Iris gifts us a rare natural phenomenon:  
a thin smile of cloud moustached by a rainbow.

An iridescent cloud.

Later I learn that Iris,  
the Greek goddess of rainbows,  
has been hiding in flower beds  
and plain sight all my life.

She's in my eyes,  
coloring every moment of wonder.

She brought me Styx water,  
and I drink from the ewer,  
making the oath to see more

knowing If I keep my eyes closed,  
I will fall unconscious.

This message carried in a rare phenomenon  
revealed after forty-four years of looking.

I wonder what other secrets  
she will show me,  
hidden in eyes of stone.

## The Dipper

I caught you  
scuttling off your rock  
in the creek that slips  
behind Morgins.

                    The frothy-white  
wave of your breast  
                    gave you away.

For a moment you perched,

bobbing your territory

and then returned to silence

broken by a man  
crossing the creek  
and spitting into the water.

*Seek the inner depth of things, and when they lead you to the edge of a great discovery, discern whether it arises from a necessity of your being. Rilke. (1)*

## **Rothorn Romantic Lessons**

I like to picture myself as the Romantic in Freidrich's painting: peak mastered, wondering about the craggy exclamations spearing through teasing cloud, the veil briefly parting to reveal the grand smile of turquoise lake, distant glittering canines.

My wife patiently reminds me there is little of the Romantic in impatience, in cursing the cloud, panic attacks about crowds clumsily crammed onto Rothorn's thin lips, COVID fears, giving up early and asking to return on the straining steam train.

So no Romantic ever climbed alone. The cloud suffocates us, then drifts a little and Lake Brienz is remade, apparent. The opening and closing, the unknowing of seeing and how long it will last. Embrace, my wife insists. No place for disappointment.

Meanwhile, other Romantics ignore social distancing, wear masks around their chins, clamber over tables, disregard each other, litter the mountain with plastic, occupy paths as if claiming virgin territory; shout, pollute with repeating Wurlizter folk music.

We wait, my wife and I. We earn our view, temper the expectations, thankful to snatch the horizon's achievements. Rothorn herself is constantly clothed. We return on the train and are gifted a sparkling lake, all the jewels you could ever want. She is the chief of them.



## She Bleeds

A hurried hike avoiding storms,  
muddy slippage down steep paths.

We find a road and my wife -  
sore with unusual aches, expectation,

stops to pee.

She flows brown,

Then I realise: that monthly trick

we play on ourselves is revealed  
in a pool of bright disappointment.

*As you unfold as an artist, just keep on, quietly and earnestly, growing through all that happens to you. Rilke, (1)*

## **Mother and Daughter**

A staggering hot July morning  
in Mont Sur Lausanne. A mother  
and daughter brave the street  
together, Mother's arm holding  
up her trembling trophy, her  
daughter dressed for summer,  
with legs that won't comply,  
a body that bounces, puppet  
on twisted strings. A triumph  
these two are, ignoring the sun,  
the stares of pitying onlookers.  
The collaborative courage that  
collapses and reforms every step.  
Here is the very best of all of us.

## First Riding Lessons

It begins with balance:  
expectations versus reality.

The balance of your body with the horse.  
Your ignorance and its acceptance.  
Your discomfort and its uncomplaining back.  
Your lack of skill and its clopping tolerance.

It is not like learning to ride a bike.

Your whole adult being is reduced  
to correcting posture, aching thighs,  
holding on gently as you judder  
along in to the pistoning trot,  
understanding how to hold hands out  
while trusting the horse won't suddenly  
stop, speed up, stagger or buck.

Then the Sitting and Standing Trot,  
timing your sore undulations  
to the sure thrust of the outside leg.  
So much harder than it sounds.  
It becomes easier when you accept  
the mastery is not Man Over Beast

but in mastering Superiority Complex,

being absorbed in muscular moments,  
making a partnership with an animal  
that will grant your Cowboy fantasy  
in return for a few scratches on its neck  
and some fruit and carrots to guzzle.

The cowboys keep secret the first lesson:  
you arrive less than the horse  
but leave more because of her.

They also don't warn you  
how much your stretched hips will scream  
and that in one lesson you'll be stuck,

unable to slip ungainly off the horse like you normally do. Just shifting an inch makes you yelp. So instead you will have to collapse in a controlled groan onto your instructor, watched by Pony Camp boy who fetched a ladder.

“But you got skills. You learned quick,” says the boy. “Quickest I’ve seen.”

I walked away hobbling but smiling with the second lesson.

*Only what is within you is near; all else is far. Rilke (2)*

## Ode to Insignificance at Pointe de Bellevue

Eventually I stagger up to my wife  
and stutter to our lunch spot, such  
steep declines either side painted  
in grey scree that slides down into  
the paddle-flat Rhone valley basin.  
Montreux, Vevey, Lausanne cluster  
like bacteria around the petri dish  
of Lac Lemman. Sensing food, alpine  
choughs come tumbling upwards  
like punctuation sniffing sentences.  
On a nearby peak crowned by a cross  
a boy shouts, barks, brays - any noise  
to fill the vastness encircling his life.  
Behind us the Dents du Midi massif  
gnaws at clouds, then spits them out  
into the Rhone valley where they gell  
into a grumbling storm, all thunder  
and threats but no lightning. West,  
a rough yellow road winks as it winds  
into the Chablais Alps. East, clouds  
cap the innumerable peaks pointing  
the way to revelations, spelling out  
our insignificance, our aching, fleshy  
pittifulness with its temporary cells.  
Yet, to know this, to be, to be here  
on Pointe de Bellevue with my wife  
marvelling at all that cannot respond,  
the roses and the angels Rilke loved,  
atoms assembled by magic and luck  
is to at least know that you are alive.

## The Music at Montreux

It's as if Divinity, working through  
the tectonic terror or Alpine uplift  
heard jazz while moving mountains  
opposite Montreux. What else explains  
the g-clef curves of the Chablais Alps  
and the seven, arguably eight notes  
of the trumpeting Dents-du-Midi.  
In the hazing summer afternoons  
the mountains are their most musical,  
joyful percussion to the sky's bass,  
they lengthen in the long evenings  
as we sip wine and nod along, while along  
the promenade saunter couples, teens  
touching, middle-aged companioned love,  
the elderly toasting the day;  
all come to appreciate the music.

*How far is between the stars, how much farther is what's right here. Rilke (5)*

## A Few Sprinkled Words

Late August evening,  
light pollution a pastel scum  
fringing the pre-Alps around Lugano.

I watch stars spell themselves.  
The Big Dipper points its paw to Polaris.  
Under Cassiopeia, the tail end

of the Perseid meteor show,  
the dusty trail of the Swift-Tuttle comet  
on its 34 year love loop of the sun.

I see only the last sparks,  
as small as grains of sand, spluttering  
kisses of the final flares.

I'm not putting words in a god's  
gaping mouth; no sprung  
mechanisms in mysterious workings.

I only have, as Einstein said, a  
vague idea about that highest truth,  
the radiant beauty of the unsearchable

and a sudden awareness  
at how fantastically miniscule  
my part is.

A few sprinkled words.

## The Fireflies

My wife tells me to go to the car park,  
to the wooded edge where the night starts.

Tiny bold lights lazily carouse the air.  
One or two at first are amazing enough.

Then a cluster. Some come to investigate  
me, landing on my trousers, blinking approval.

I am amazed there is such magic here  
in the woods of Montagnola, metres from

overpriced food for Ferrari drivers,  
alcohol diffusing any wider awareness.

Hesse knew this, he found the fireflies  
and bemoaned the shrinking of woods.



*But the dark embraces everything:  
shapes and shadows, creatures and me, Rilke (2)*

## **The Trout**

I see you sliding  
over the muddy gold  
bed of the shallow river  
as it slips into Lake Lugano.

You follow a flittering  
shoal of hope, gliding  
the thin layers between  
the different forms of air.

I'm surprised by your size  
as you snuggle into the sheets  
of river and light. Lord  
of the muddier moments,

King-sized in a peasant course,  
you draw me down the line  
of the green-grey water  
until merging with the unseen.

## The Same Dance

In the same village as Hesse  
I see the same gnats dancing  
in the green-lit light of dusk  
between softly conducting trees,  
the breeze that's a ballet's breath.

We see a dance where death  
stalks the days; a frantic swirl  
of mating chances, sudden swerve  
from a chancing dragonfly, clumsy  
moth staggering into wakefulness.

An hour later, the sun limbos  
below a glowing mountain ridge  
and the electron excitement  
fizzes into mystery, leaving  
a gathering night's silence.



## Not Forgotten

Find perfect tiny blue alpine flowers  
forget-me-nots, *Wald-Vergissmeinnicht*

I am reminded of being a little boy  
when flowers were  
everything beautiful and right about the world.

We collected them, made chains,  
pressed and painted them.  
Plato would be smiling. But not

the German knight who, wanting to pick  
the blue winks for his lady, falls  
into a river, drowned by the weight of affection,

‘Vergiss mein nicht!’ Forget me not!  
Remember, yes, but no loss  
can be recovered in flowers, however wished.

*So don't be frightened, dear friend, if a sadness confronts you larger than any you have known,  
casting its shadow over all you do. Rilke (1)*

## Little Red Dungarees

My wife found them in Salzburg.  
Our second time back, four months  
after the first bleed, the first time we lost him.

Now keen to lift the curse,  
we went shopping in the Old Town -  
clothes to dress our dream.

She held them up and sighed.  
We both saw him scuttling around parks  
in his little red dungarees, muddy

leg stumps, the red fading with washing,  
the bottoms retreating upwards.  
Little red dungarees saved for a second.

We bought the dungarees and the dream.  
Six months later - the final time -  
so we laid them to rest in a box.

## The Windmills

The two boys run to the windmills  
spinning colours outside the shop.

I remember windmills at the beach,  
colouring in the cold summer winds.

The same windmills guarding graves  
next to Duncan's. The wind blows.

the windmills spin and the two boys  
cry out in delight, and Duncan is silent.



## The Real Beauty

The real beauty of a rainbow  
is beyond the obviously stated.

It is in the coming together of events:  
photons and water molecules, wind

and cloud, and your eyes evolved  
from ancestors seeking out ripe fruit.

An accident hard-wired into our  
Nature so that find beauty in

waves mundanely washing a shore,  
birds gathering to roost in the evening,

the predictable orbit of a moon,  
the indifferent sprinkling of stars,

birds boasting their worthiness,  
the puffing sex of flowers.

Perhaps the real beauty of anything  
is that we that escape ourselves,

neither worryingly alive nor eternally  
dead, just transcended to space between.



*I can only measure the world in terms of longing. Rilke (2)*

## **Dreams of Lake Como**

I dream of your ripples on the lakeshore,  
ripples of golden waves over golden rocks.  
Like an Arthurian knight, I am drawn  
to your waters and hear the Lady chanting  
in Italian, grail promises of healing, cleansing  
siren drawing me into your turquoise depths.  
Fish flit at your hem, some big and unhurried.

In some dreams the lake hazes with mist.  
Your mountains become rumors, your far  
shore a blur and your ballad takes me back  
to childhood: playing in moorland rivers  
and coastal rock pools. Time is upturned  
in your glacial heart. The waves giggle over  
rocks and sadness in the polished stones.

In other dreams you dress in your jewels:,  
orange and cream roofed villages piercing  
tiny ears of land, the isthmus hand of Bellagio  
dressed in lace strips, steep pearl-topped  
mountain crows. This is something beyond art,  
rounder than tabled intentions, deeper  
than stone worship. What do you think of me?

Lucky atoms as near to nothing as can be,  
an organic moment of punctuation in time's  
long sentences. Your eroded indifference is all  
the more beautiful. My prayers are answered  
in reflection. Long after I am gone, you will still  
be Lake Como, but for these dreamy moments,  
we drink wine from the same earthen Grail

## William Blake at Felpham, West Sussex

An unfurled question mark  
answers the point where infinity begins.  
Standing on the beach at Felpham,  
studying the way the sea scars the horizon,  
clouds pouring out in smoky angles,  
cracks creating all kinds of illuminations;  
shafting bolts of light and gloom.

No wonder Blake stood here  
and thought the sea was talking to him,  
tongues of sunlight and wind and cloud  
fluttering through his mind. Here  
at this unremarkable, passable place  
where Human and Nature face each other,  
taking turns to question and yawn,

the world turning under you, tides tugging  
at that grander part that belongs  
to something renewed every day, before  
being, waves pounding, reeling  
back again, a swell and releasing gift  
unknown in its giving. Gulls cry you  
back to when you saw worlds in the sand,

an eternity of assembling castles by hand,  
then the cheering grief of waves taking  
away your creation. Here is the heavenly  
line drawn between times, stretched beyond,  
suggested in the shallowest of curves.  
The future remains uncertain, questionable  
For now the horizon is enough.

*The tasks that have been entrusted to us are often difficult. Almost everything that matters is difficult, and everything matters. Rilke (1)*

## **Wife and Bread**

Before my wife left  
she patiently showed me how to make bread.  
Three times.

A simple no-knead recipe -  
the bread I loved. Anyone can make it.  
I made my vows.

A weekend later, I dreamt  
of its taste, the memory of our life together,  
now alone, ready.

I followed the recipe  
faithfully, until I added too much water.  
A sloppy gesture.

The second time,  
The water was too warm for the yeast.  
A gooey gesture.

The third time,  
I took special care, measured precisely.  
The bread didn't rise.

I gave up to  
the crumbs of longing to be reunited with  
my wife and bread.

## Flowers in Interlaken

He takes time mounting the stairs.  
The years are heavy in his lungs.  
Peeking out of his small backpack,  
a bunch of three yellow roses, a gift  
for the woman he's summiting.

Over the last week, many middle aged  
and old men have rung our bell,  
asked for 'Jason', looked lost, mis-  
reading our confusion as confession.  
Then sigh with relief and head up.

We joked about it being a brothel,  
not the home of an 'American family',  
as our holiday rental landlord told us.  
No American voices, just shuffling at night.  
Today unmistakably squeaky percussion.

No joke anymore. Disgust mingled  
with awe that you could be so old  
and still desire minutes of conquest.  
Perhaps he goes there for the company,  
gives roses, talk lovingly of a dead wife.

*Be ahead of a parting, as if it had already happened. Rilke, (5)*

## The Caterpillar

If you were here  
you would squat down,  
flesh overlapping in hilly  
thigh folds and watch the caterpillar  
huffing its way across the tarmac,  
it's hairy body bulging upwards  
in the mountainous effort of movement,  
then flattening out, tiny  
legs scampering to safety.  
You would point, ask  
questions, worship my  
answers, all the most fun  
imaginable until the next miracle  
you should have been.

## Thanks for the View

Penultimate night  
In this apartment. 2.5 years.  
Gone. I loved  
you, view,

The palm trees and conifers  
singing in the foreground, gusts of pollen,  
shaken in storms, dressed  
and undressed like the days.

I loved you background pre-Alps undulating  
in the distance, escalating with snow,  
put in their place with clouds  
of my brief, fleshy egotism.

I loved you middle-ground hill of Muzanno,  
crowned with Breganzona,  
the evening's first constellation  
and the monastery its own moon,

a thumb of approval for all the human  
business we build up on hills,  
under the sneer of mountains,  
ringed by the lustrous trees.