

RAINER MARIA RILKE:
REQUIEM FOR A WOMAN

This poem is a tribute to the painter Paula Modersohn-Becker, with whom Rilke carried on a platonic but emotionally intense relationship starting in 1900 and ending with her death in childbirth in 1907. In her lifetime Modersohn-Becker was known more as the wife of painter Otto Modersohn than as a painter in her own right. Today she is viewed as a major innovator in German Expressionist art, while her husband's work is regarded as competent and conventional.

The conflict between being her own person and being her husband's wife continued throughout Modersohn-Becker's career; she tried hard to be both at once. There were trips to Paris to soak up the latest art and trips to Berlin to attend cooking classes. At the end of her life she was preparing for the role of mother, a role she did not live to play.

Rilke, like many of Modersohn-Becker's associates, was slow to recognize the caliber of her talent. In this poem he renders an anguished and belated appreciation of the depth of her singular artistry.

I have my dead ones, and I let them go
And was amazed to see them so consoled,
So soon at home in being dead, so just,
Unlike their reputation. Only you
Return; you graze me, walking round, about
To bump something and make a sound of you,
Betraying you. Oh do not take from me
What I have learned so slowly. You are wrong
If anything at all can move you so
To homesickness. For we transform these things:
They are not here, but mirrored in to us
From out our being, as we catch sight of them.
I thought you were much farther. It confuses me
That of all people, *you* should wander back,
Who transformed more than any other woman.
That we were frightened when you died, no, that
Your powerful dying darkly interrupted us,
Cutting the Formerly off from the Henceforth,
Is our concern, and to encompass that
Will be the work that we must do with everything.
But that you were afeared and even now
Harbor the fear, where fear is meaningless;
That you should lose a piece of your eternity;
That you should enter here again, friend, here,
Where nothing yet quite *is*; that you, confused,
In your first everything, confused and halfway,
Faced with the opening of the endless natures
Could fail to grasp them as you would grasp anything;
That from the circulation that received you,
The wordless sinker of some great unrest
Should pull you down again to counted time—
That wakes me like a burglar in the night.

If I could say you only deign to come
Out of the greatness of your heart's abundance,
Because you are so certain of yourself
That you walk round, a child not yet afraid
Of places where they'll do something to you—
But no: you plead. That is what chills my bones,
Pulling at them like sawteeth back and forth.
A grim reproach brought to me by your ghost,
Brought home to me at night, when I draw back
Into my lungs and into my intestines,
Into the last poor chamber of my heart,
Such a reproach would not be as macabre
As this, your pleading. What are you pleading for?

Speak: should I travel? Is there anywhere
A thing you left behind that is tormented
And straining after you? Should I explore
A land you never saw, although it was
As close as your brain's other half to you?

Then I will navigate its rivers, I
Will go on land and ask of ancient customs,
And I will speak with women in the doorways,
Observing how they call their children to them.
I'll notice how they take the landscape in
Around them as they go to the old work
Of fields and meadows; will desire that I
Be led into the presence of the king,
And will pay off the priests sufficiently
To set me down before the strongest icon
And go away and close the temple doors.
And finally, when I know these many things,
Then I will simply watch the animals,
That something of their movements may transpire
Into my joints; will have a short existence
There in their eyes, that hold me and then slowly
Let go, peaceably, without prejudice.
I then will cause the gardeners to recite
Long lists of flowers, so that in the shards
Of their fine Christian names I may bring back
Some trace of all their hundred fragrances.
And I will buy its fruits, its fruits that have
The land inside, as far up as the sky.

For that was your department: ripened fruits.
You used to put them in the pans before you
And weigh them out upon a scale of colors.
And as you saw the fruits, so you saw women,
And saw the children so, from inside out
Driven into the forms of their existence.
Finally you came to see yourself as fruit;
You peeled yourself of clothes and set yourself

Before the mirror, eased yourself on in,
All but your looking, which remained outside
And did not say *I am* but said *This is*.
So void of curiosity was your looking,
So stripped of gain, of such true poverty,
It no longer desired you even: holy.

I'd like to keep you where you used to put
Yourself: deep in the mirror, far away
From everything. Why do you come so differently?
Why do you contradict yourself? Why do
You try to make me think that in those beads
Of amber round your neck there was still gravity,
The kind of gravity that does not exist
In the beyond of peaceful images?
Why does your posture show me your misgiving?
What makes you lay your body's contours out
Like lines upon your palm, so that henceforth,
Seeing them, I must read your fate in them?

Come in the candlelight. I do not fear
To look upon the dead. For when they come,
They have the right to stand there for a moment
Before our eyes, the same as other things.

Come here: we will be still a little while.
Look at this rose upon my writing-desk:
Is not the light round it just as reluctant
As that round you? It should not be here either.
Out in the garden, unconfused with me,
It should have stayed or perished, but instead
It's here: what does it care about my consciousness?

Don't be afraid if now I grasp, for oh,
I feel it rise in me, I cannot help it,
I have to grasp, and though it meant my death,
To grasp that you are here. There, I have grasped it.
Just as a blind man grasps something around him,
I feel your plight and know no name for it.
Come let us mourn together that someone
Pulled you out of your mirror. Can you cry still?
You can't. The strength and pressure of your tears
Is changed now to a riper looking-on.
You were about to channel all your sap
Into the currents of a stronger being
That rises up and flows, balanced and blind—
Had chance not pulled you back, ultimate chance
That pulled you from your farthest advancement
Into a world again where the blood *mills*.
Not all at once; only a piece at first;

But as from day to day around this piece
The realness added on and made it heavy,

You needed all of you: and so you went
And broke yourself out of the law in pieces
Painstakingly, because you needed you.
Then you went down and dug out of your heart's
Nocturnal earth and warmth the still-green seeds
From which your death was meant to sprout: your own,
Your special death, the death of all your life,
And ate them then and there, your seeds of death,
Ate the death-seed like any other seed,
And had an aftertaste of sweetness in you,
All unintended, sweetness on the lips,
You: who were sweet already in your senses.

Oh let us mourn. Do you know how your blood,
Caught up in a circulation like no other,
Reluctantly came back because you called it?
With what confusion it took up again
The body's smaller circulation, and
With what amazed distrust entered the womb,
Suddenly weary from the long way back.
You drove it on; you pushed it to the fore,
You dragged it toward the furnace, as one drags
A herd of victims to the sacrifice,
And asked it to be happy in the bargain.
And finally you compelled it: it came running
And gave itself up happily. You thought,
Being accustomed to the other measures,
That it was only for a while; except
Now you were back in time, and time is long.
And time goes on, and time adds up, and time
Is like the relapse of a chronic sickness.

How short your life was in comparison
With these long hours where you sat before
The many energies of your great future
And calmly bent them down to the new child-seed,
Which was a fate once more. Oh bitter labor,
Labor beyond all strength. And yet you did it.
Day after day you dragged yourself to work
And pulled the lovely weaving from the loom
And used your threads again a different way—
And finally put good face on your bad fortune.

When it was done, you wanted your reward
Like children when they've drunk bittersweet tea
That hopefully will make them well again.
You found your own reward; you were too distant,
As always, from all others for another
To have imagined what reward would please you.
But you knew, and you sat up in your childbed.
And there before you was a looking-glass

That gave you back yourself completely. Now
That was all *you*, all *out there*, and inside
Only the sweet deceit of every woman
Who puts on jewels and combs and styles her hair.

And so you died, as women used to die,
Old-fashioned dying in a cozy house,
The death of women in their childbearing
Who try to close themselves again and can't
Because the darkness that they also bore
Comes back again and forces its way in.

But even so, shouldn't someone have hired
Some wailing-women? Women who weep for money,
And who, if you pay them right, will start a wail
At any hour of the night that grows too still.

More customs, please! We're running short on customs.

Everything goes and falls into disuse.
So you, the dead one, must come here to me
To get your mourning, Do you hear me mourn?
I wish my voice could be a cloth for you,
To drape across the fragments of your death;
I'd rip at it until it was in shreds,
And everything I say would have to go
Ragged and freezing in this voice—if just
Complaints were needed. But now I accuse:
Not the one man who pulled you out of yourself
(I cannot find him out; he's like the others),
But I accuse them all in him: the Man.

If there should rise from deep within me somewhere
A child-that-has-been, something yet unknown,
Perhaps the purest childhood of my childhood,
I do not want to know of it. I'll take it
And shape it into an angel without looking,
And I will throw it into the first row
Of screaming angels that remind the Lord.

For all this suffering has gone on too long.
No one can keep it up; it is too hard for us,
The crazy suffering of an unjust love,
That, building on seniority and habit,
Claims rights and lets injustice grow like weeds.
Where is the man who has the right to own?
And who can own what does not keep itself
But only sometimes makes a happy catch
And throws it back again like a child's ball.
As little as the captain can hold fast
To winged Victory figured on his bow
When, by the secret lightness of her godhead,
She is whisked off into the sparkling sea-wind:
So little can we call out to the woman

Who does not see us any more but walks
Miraculously, without accident,
On down the narrow strip of her existence—
Unless we have a taste for what is wrong.

For that is wrong, if anything is wrong:
Not to increase the freedom of a loved one
By all the freedom that you find in you.
And everywhere we love, we have but this:
To let each other go; since holding on
Is easy, and we don't have to learn it first.

Are you still there? What corner are you in?
You used to know so much of everything,
Could do so many things, as you walked out
Open to everything like breaking day.
Women suffer, true lovers are alone,
And artists at their labors sometimes sense
That everywhere they love, they must work change.
You started to do both; both are in that
Which fame distorts in taking it away.
But you were distant from all fame. You were
Inconspicuous, having softly taken
Your beauty in, as one takes down a pennant
On the gray morning of a working day.
You wanted nothing but a lifetime's work,
Which is undone for all that, still undone.

If you are still there, if within this darkness
There still is any spot in which your spirit
Vibrates in sympathy with the shallow soundwaves
Which, lonely in the night, a single voice
Stirs up in the currents of a high-walled room,
Then hear me: help me. See, we are afloat,
Not knowing when we'll slide out of our progress
And into something we don't mean, in which
We get ourselves caught up as in a dream
And die in it and never do wake up.
No one is wiser. Anyone who puts
His blood into a lifelong work can find
One day he just can't keep holding it up there
And so its worthless poundage drags it down:
Because there is an ancient enmity,
Somewhere, between man's life and his great works.
That I may see it and may say it, help me.

Come back no more. If you can bear it, be
Dead with the dead. The dead are occupied.
Help me so that it does not scatter you,
As things most distant often help: in me.