

Alfred Corn

Seventh Elegy

(translated from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*)

PANDERING: no more of that, Voice. An approach you've now
outgrown
shouldn't prompt your song, even if you cried out cleanly as a bird
when the season in its ascent thrusts him aloft and almost forgets
that he's wildlife, anxious, and not just a heart singled out
to be flung into the brighter skies of an inward Heaven. Like him,
you'd still be courting some beloved not yet in sight,
so that she'd take note of you, this silent person in whom a response
slowly awakens, warmed by the act of listening, —
to your enkindled feelings a responder ardent and heartfelt.

Oh, and springtime would join in too—, for there is no place
that wouldn't resound with annunciation. First, those small,
inquiring grace-notes, which pure, affirmative daylight
enfolds far and wide in heightening silence.
To scale a flight of birdcall stairs, up to the dreamt-of
Temple of the Future—; then on to the trill, a fountain
whose upward-striving brilliance embraces its own falling
in playful anticipation. . . . With summer soon to come.

Not just all the summer dawns—, not just
how they mutate into day and glow with inception.
Not just the days, which, tenderly lighting the flowers, up above
grow vast and mighty among full-grown treetops.
Not just the devotion of these developing powers,
not just the pathways, the evening meadows, not just
the breathing clarity that follows late afternoon thunderstorms,
not just approaching sleep and a sunset premonition. . .
but instead, the nights! Instead, summer's exalted
nights, instead, stars, our earth's own stars.
Oh, to have died at last, to know them forever, all the stars,
for how, tell me, how can one forget them!

So, you see, I called to my beloved. But not only that one person
came. Out of weakening graves, other young women
would come and foregather. . . For, the call once sent forth,

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how could I restrict its reach? Those who've foundered and are sinking always try to get back to land. — Children, hear me: one solid thing, when it's firmly grasped, will amount to many others. Do not value Fate more than the richness of childhood. For how often you outdistanced your beloved, panting, panting after the blissful sprint, towards nothingness, into the clear.

Just being here is glorious. Even you knew that, young girls who must have suffered want, and went under — in the sordid back-alleys of the city, festering or filling up with debris others had tossed away. You each got an hour, perhaps not even a full hour, between two sessions, a timespan barely measurable at all, when you could live and simply be there. All of it. Your arteries pulsing with existence. Only, we soon dismiss what we have if our mocking neighbor neither notices or covets it. We seem bent on holding it up to view, but not even joy at its most manifest lets itself be known until we've transfigured it with inwardness.

Nowhere, love, will the world abide save in inwardness. Our life moves onward in transfiguration. And steadily smaller shrinks the ambit of the merely external. Where once an enduring house was, an image passes before the mind's eye, fully domesticated to consciousness as though it had always dwelt in the brain. The spirit of the times builds up immense reserves of power, abstract as the driving force it captures from all that is. Temples no longer matter to it. These extravagances our hearts once paid for, we're spared from, in private. Yes, wherever one still remains, a Something once prayed to, waited on, knelt before—, that object hands itself over, just as it is, to the invisible. Many no longer notice it, indeed, don't see the advantage gained by building it *inwardly*, with columns and statues, grander!

With each stale turn of the world, the disinherited increase, those who possess neither what once was nor what will come next. For even the next moment is far beyond humans. To us it shouldn't be a quandary; let it grow stronger as we protect a plan we still recognize. — This once stood firm among us, stood at the core of annihilating fate; in the midst of our motion towards we don't know what, it stood, almost real, and bent stars down to it out of their fixed heaven. Angel, to you I still point it out: *there it is!* In your gaze

let it stand at last redeemed, now finally upright.
Pillars, pylons, the Sphinx, and the cathedral's aspiring
gray upthrust marked out against a fading or foreign city.

Wasn't it miraculous, Angel? Wonder at us and what we are,
O elevated being, say how we achieved so much, my breath
falls short when I try to praise it. So we have not after all
let these spaces go to waste, these generous spaces, which are
our own. How fearfully huge they must be if after thousands
of years our feelings haven't filled them to overflowing.
But surely one spire was tall, may we not say? O Angel, it *was* that, —
tall, even set beside you. Chartres was great, — and music
reached up still higher and surpassed us. Yet even a woman
in love —, oh, sitting alone by night at her window. . . .
did she not come up as high as your knee —?

Don't regard this as courtship,
Angel, even if it were, you would not come. For my
summons is a complete holding at bay; you can't, against such
a strong current, make headway. An outstretched arm:
that's what my calling is. And its upturned hand,
opened to grip yours, remains there before you,
open, warding off and warning
You, who can never be grasped. Wide open.