

GORDON GRIGSBY

A Translation of Five of Rilke's Sonnets to Orpheus

I

A tree arose there. O pure transcendence!
Orpheus sings! O tall tree in the ear!
And all was silent. But in that silence
new beginnings, signs and transformations moved.

From stillness animals pressed through the light
now opened forest of nest and den;
and it was neither cunning nor fear
that kept them so quiet there

but listening. Roar, yelp, baying cry
dwindled inside them. And where before
there had been merely a shed to hear with,

shelter created from obscurest need
with an entrance whose doorposts shook in the
 slightest air,
you built them a temple inside the ear.

II

She was hardly a girl, and suddenly appeared
out of the joyful union of song and lyre,
and gleamed clearly through her spring veils,
and made herself a bed in my ear.

She slept in me. And her sleep was everything:
The trees that always held my gaze, those
distances it seemed I touched, the felt meadows,
and every wonder that surprised me from within.

She slept the world. O singing god, how did you
 lead her
to such consummation that she never longed
first to be awake? See, she stood and slept.

Where is her death? O will you find that theme
before your own song is consumed?
Where does she go as she sinks beyond me? . . . Hardly
 a girl

III

A god can do it. But tell me, how can a man
follow him through the narrow lyre?
His mind is split. At the place in the heart
where the two paths cross, there is no Temple to
Apollo.

Poetry, as you teach us, is not desiring,
not reaching toward some final completeness.
Poetry is Being. For a god, easy.
But when do *we* exist? And when does he

turn the earth and stars toward human life?
It's not enough that, young, you're in love
and a voice forces your mouth open—learn

to forget that easy singing. It ends soon.
To sing reality takes a different kind of breath.
A breath enclosing nothing. An air turning inside a
god. A wind.

IV

You gentle lovers, step now and then
into air not meant for you;
let it divide against your face;
it will tremble behind you, joined again.

You who are blest, you who are whole,
like the first beat of the heart,
you are both bow and target for arrows—
only stained by weeping will your smile endure.

Don't dread suffering, give its weight
back to the weight of the earth;
the mountains are heavy, the seas are heavy.

Even the trees you planted as children
have grown too heavy for you to bear.
But the spaces . . . but the open air . . .

V

No stone will keep him. Just let the rose
bloom each year with memory.
It's always Orpheus. He changes form
in this and this. We shouldn't worry

about other names. Once and for all,
it's Orpheus when there's song. He comes and goes.
Isn't it enough that he sometimes survives
by a day or two the roses in the bowl?

But he has to disappear so you'll understand!
Though he himself fears this vanishing.
For while his word's surpassing all things here,

he's already there, where you can't follow.
The trellis of the lyre doesn't trap his hands.
And he submits just when he oversteps the bounds.

BETTY HUFFMAN

Why Can't We Die the Way We Were Born?
after the death of Harry Hoopes, Hazel Hoopes, Mary Ferguson

A few hours of unexpected pain
At least leaving no memory,
And no possible sense of anticipation.

For too many of us
Death is slow
And approaches with such taunts.

Whatever follows may be memory-free,
But anticipation
Seems too high a price to pay for life.