

## Mary's Life

Rainer Maria Rilke

### Her Birth

What it must have cost the angels  
not to suddenly burst out singing, the way one bursts out crying,  
for they knew for sure on this night was born the mother  
to the boy, to him who soon will be the epiphany.

Winging, they hid themselves and showed the direction,  
Where off alone lay the farm of Joachim.  
They felt in themselves and everywhere around purity condensing,  
but neither of them dared go down to him.

Both were already beside themselves from the commotion.  
A neighbor came and spoke her wisdom, but didn't know what to do.  
The old man went and carefully soothed the lowing  
of the dark cow. It had never been like this before.

### Her Presentation in the Temple

To grasp how she was then,  
you have to first call up a place  
where pillars work in you, where you can feel  
how steps feel, where arches full of danger  
bridge the chasm of a space  
that stays in you, for it towered up  
from such pieces that you no longer knew  
how to lift them off you: you might pull them down on you.  
You are so vast, everything in you is stone,  
wall, stairs, view, domed curvature--then try  
the great curtain you have before you,  
pull it away a little with both hands:  
there, it gleams of the loftiest things  
and takes your breath and sense of touch away.  
Up there, down there, palace rises above palace,  
bannisters from bannisters stream out ever broader  
and rise to surface over such verges  
that as you see them your head swims.  
There a cloud from censers makes  
thick gloom close around you; but what is farther away  
fires its gleam straight into you--

and now if the glow from clear bowls of flame  
plays on slowly approaching robes:  
how would you stand it?  
But she came and raised  
her eyes to look at everything around.  
(A child, a little girl among the women.)  
Then she stepped, silent, full of trust in herself,  
toward the fastidious pomp that made way for her:  
so much was everything that men had built  
already outweighed by the praise  
in her heart, by the joy of giving herself to the signs within her.  
The parents thought to pass her upwards,  
The menacing man with the jewels on his chest  
received her, it seemed: but she passed through them all  
small as she was, past every hand, out  
and into her fate, which, loftier than the great hall,  
was already set, and heavier than from where she came.

#### The Annunciation

That an angel entered (you must recognize this)  
did not scare her. As little as others startle  
if a sunbeam or the moon at night goes to work in their room,  
did she care about the figure  
an angel took to come;  
she hardly suspected that this kind of sojourn  
is work for an angel. (If we only knew  
how pure she was. Had not once a doe,  
lying in the woods, caught a glance of her and  
so saw herself in her that  
without any mating she conceived the unicorn,  
the animal from the light, the pure animal?)  
No, it was not that he entered, but that he came so close,  
the angel, a young man's face  
so near to hers that his glance and hers,  
the way she looked up at him,  
as if suddenly outside everything was empty  
and what millions were seeing, doing, bearing,  
pressed into them: only she and he,  
the seeing, the being seen, stunning in one another's eyes,  
nowhere else but in this place: Look,  
this is frightening. And it frightened them both.  
Then the angel sang his song.

## The Visitation

In the beginning it went easy for her,  
but sometimes on a climb she became already  
aware of her wonderful body,  
and she stood, breathing, on the high  
Judaeen hills. It was not the land below,  
but her fullness spread around her;  
walking, she had a feeling: You cannot ever go beyond  
the greatness that she now felt.  
And it moved her, to want to lay her hand  
on the womb of the other woman, who was farther along.  
And the women swayed toward one another  
and touched each other's gown and hair.  
Each, full of her holiness,  
took comfort with her kin.  
The Savior in her was still only a bloom,  
But joy so carried away the Baptist  
that he leaped in her cousin's womb.

## Joseph's Suspicion

And the angel spoke and took pains  
with the man clenching his fists:  
But don't you see in every fold of her clothes,  
that she's as fresh as God's morning?  
But the man looked darkly at him,  
muttering: What is it that's changed her?  
But the angel cried: Carpenter,  
haven't you yet seen that it's the Lord God's doing?  
While you make planks, do you in your pride  
really want to take to task  
he who from the same wood  
makes the leaves come out and the buds swell?  
It came to him. And when he now, truly in fear,  
lifted his eyes to the angel,  
it was gone. Slowly he took off  
his thick cap, and then he sang God's praise.

## The Annunciation to the Shepherds

Look up, you men, you there at the fire,  
you who know the infinite heavens,  
you, astrologers, right here! See, I am a new,

rising star. My whole being burns,  
and beams so strong and is so uncannily  
full of light that the deep firmament  
is not enough for me. Let my brilliance  
into your life: The dark looks,  
the dark hearts, destinies dark as night  
that fill you. Shepherds, how alone  
I am in you. All at once I have room.  
Don't be so surprised: the great breadfruit tree  
does cast a shadow. Yes, that came from me.  
You, the fearless, if you only knew  
how now on your faces, as you behold me,  
the future shines. In this stark light  
much will come to pass. I trust it to you,  
for you keep secrets; to you true believers  
here, everything speaks. Heat and rain speak,  
flight of birds, the wind and what you are,  
nothing tilts your balance, grows in you to vanity,  
stuffing itself. You do not hold  
things in the hollows of your heart  
to torment them. Just as his delight  
streams through an angel, so earthly things  
drive through you. If a thornbush  
suddenly catches fire, from it  
eternity can call to you. Cherubim,  
if they deign to move along  
with your flock, do not surprise you.  
You would throw yourselves face down,  
call it the earth, and pray to it.  
But that was then. Now it will be something new.  
From it the earth's globe, struggling, will widen.  
What is a thornbush to us: God comes true  
in a young woman's womb. I am the light  
of the truth in her, and I will come with you.

### The Birth of Christ

Had you not this simplicity, how would  
it be clear to you what lights up the night?  
Look, see, God, who thunders over the world,  
turns tender, and in you comes to the world.

Had you imagined him greater?

What is great? His destiny cuts straight

across all dimensions; he cancels them.  
Even a star has no path like that.  
You see, these kings are great,  
and because of your womb they have hauled here

treasures they hold the greatest they can bring.  
Maybe what they have given you surprises you,  
but look at the folds of your robe,  
how he even now surpasses everything.

All the amber that they ship abroad,  
every gold finery, and the incense  
that in clouds spreads in the senses:  
none of this lasts long,  
and at the end we are sorry it has gone.

But you will see: He will gladden.

Rest on the Flight into Egypt

Breathless just now having fled  
the thick of the slaughter of the innocents,  
how unremarkably great they had  
become on their journey.

Just a moment ago in scared glances back  
the worst of their fear faded away,  
and already on their gray mule  
they were bringing whole cities into danger;

for as they, small in a great country,  
almost nothing, came near the mighty temples,  
all the idols cracked, as if betrayed,  
and lost all their meaning.

Is it thinkable that from their passage  
everything turned so desperate and angry?  
And they became afraid even of themselves.  
Only the child, without a word, was trusting.

Still, in their flight, they had  
to sit a while. But then it moved--  
See: the tree that hung quietly over them,  
more than like a servant to them,

it bowed to them. The same tree  
whose wreaths preserve for eternity  
the brows of dead pharaohs,  
it bowed. It felt new crowns  
blooming. And they sat as if in a dream.

#### Of the Wedding at Cana

Can she be other than proud of him  
who made her homeliest things beautiful?  
Was not the deep night itself, used to great things,  
as if beside itself that he brought the light?

Did he not once when they lost him  
prove himself a scandal to his glory?  
Were not the wisest all ears,  
not a word from their mouths? And was the house

not like new from his voice?  
Surely she had a hundred times forbid  
her beaming joy in him to show.  
She watched after him, astounded.

But there at that wedding feast,  
when to their surprise they ran short of wine,  
she looked to him and asked for a gesture from him,  
and didn't understand why he said no.

And then he did it. She understood later,  
how she had pushed him on his way;  
for now he really was working wonders,  
and the whole sacrifice was ordained,

unstoppable. Yes, it stood written.  
But was it already then set to happen?  
She: she had set it going  
in the blindness of her vanity.

At the table full of fruit and food  
she made glad like the others and did not see  
that the water of her tears  
had become blood with this wine.

#### Before the Passion

Oh, if this is what you wanted, you ought not  
have sprung from a woman's womb:  
For Saviors you have to dig in the mountains,  
where they break the hard from the hard.

Are you not yourself sorry, to lay waste  
this way to the valley you love? Look how weak I am;  
I have nothing but milk and streams of tears,  
and you were always so much more than me.

At so much cost you had been promised to me.  
Why did you not drop wild out of me, like an animal, outside?  
If you only need a tiger to tear you to pieces,  
why did the women raise me for a woman,

to weave for you a soft, pure robe,  
in it not once the slightest trace  
of a seam to pinch you--: that was my whole life,  
and now suddenly you turn nature upside down.

#### Pietá

Now my misery is complete, and wordless  
it fills me. I am numb as the inside  
of a stone is numb.  
Hard as I am, I know only one thing:  
You were great—  
...and were so great,  
as to stand out  
as pain way too great for  
my heart to take.  
Now you lie across my womb,  
now I can no more  
give birth to you.

#### Her Consolation in the Company of the Risen

What they felt then: is it not  
sweet before all the mysteries  
and yet always earthly:  
he was there, a little pale still from the grave,  
relieved, he stepped to her:  
everything in him, risen.

To her first. How without a word they  
were there, healing.  
Yes, they were healing, that was it. They had no need  
to clutch one another.  
He lay for barely a second  
his soon eternal  
hand on the woman's shoulder.  
And they began,  
quiet, like the trees in spring,  
all the same time unending,  
this season  
of their closest time together.

On Mary's Death  
(Three Pieces)

1.

The same great angel who once  
brought down the word of her conception,  
stood there, waiting for her to notice him,  
and spoke: Now it's time for you to appear.  
And she startled, like before, and proved  
herself again the virgin, simply saying yes to him.  
But he glowed, and drawing infinitely near,  
he vanished before her eyes--and he called  
the apostles, all gone far away,  
to gather at the house down the hill,  
the house of that last supper. They came, in grief,  
and entered the room in fear: There lay  
on the narrow bedstead the woman  
steeped in an enigma of downfall and election,  
all unscathed, as if never used,  
and she was listening to the angel's song.  
Now that she saw them all waiting  
there behind their candles, she tore herself  
from so many voices and still from her heart  
gave away the last two gowns she owned,  
(oh, spring of wordless streams of tears).  
But she lay in her frailty  
and drew heaven so near  
to Jerusalem that her soul,  
leaving, had only to stretch a little:  
already he who knew everything about her,  
was lifting her up into her divine nature.



2.

Who thought that before she came  
heaven was not yet all full?  
He who had risen had taken his place,  
yet beside him, for 24 years,  
the seat was empty. And they had already begun  
to be used to the open space,  
which was as if healed, for the son's  
outshining glory filled it.  
So she too, when she stepped into heaven,  
did not go to him, much as she longed to;  
no place was there, only *He* was there, shining  
with a radiance that made her hurt.  
Yet as she now, a form it moved them to see,  
joined the other new souls  
and inconspicuous, light to light, took a place,  
there burst from her being a reserve  
of such brilliance that the angel blinded  
by its light cried out, Who is she?  
It was astounding. Then they all saw:  
how God the Father above drew back our Lord,  
so that in the gentle twilight lapped around  
the empty place something appeared like  
a little sore spot, a sign of someone missing,  
like a loss He still felt, a remnant  
of His earthly time, a dry longing --.  
Their eyes followed her; she all anxious looked away,  
bowed far forward, as if she felt: *I am*  
the sorrow he has suffered longest-: and fell suddenly forward.  
But the angels took her to them,  
And let her lean on them and blessedly singing  
carried her up the last piece of the way.

3.

But before the Apostle Thomas came,  
after it was too late, the angel long since  
prepared for him stepped up  
to the grave and ordered,  
  
Push the stone aside. If you want to know  
where she is, she who moved your heart:  
Look, she was like a lavender pillow  
laid to rest for a while in there,  
  
that the earth to come after her smell

in its folds like a delicate cloth.  
Everything dead (you feel), everything sick,  
is stunned by her sweet fragrance.

Look at the linen: where is anything so white,  
where it's blinding and doesn't shrink?  
This light from the pure dead body  
made it brighter than sunshine.

Are you not amazed, how gently she left it?  
It's almost as if she still were here, nothing has moved.  
Yet the heavens above are shaking.  
Man, kneel down, see me go, and sing.

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