

Rilke

Sonnets to Orpheus

selected poems
with new translations
and photographs
by Cliff Crego

selected *Sonnets to Orpheus* [FIRST PART]

I



There rose a tree. .

XIV



*We are involved with
flower*

III



A god can do it.

XVIII



*Do you hear the New
Lord,*

V



Erect no monument.

XIX



*Even when the world
swiftly changes,*

VII



*Only in the fields
of Praise*

XXI



*O, what her teacher
taught her,*

IX



*Only he who has
lifted his lyre*

XXII



*We are the driving
ones.*

XII



*Even when the farmer
cares and toils,*

selected *Sonnets to Orpheus* [SECOND PART]

I



*Breathing, you
invisible poem!*

XV



O fountain mouth,

IV



O this is the creature

XVI



*Only the dead drink
from the spring heard
by us here,*

V



*We, the violent ones,
we last longer.*

XX



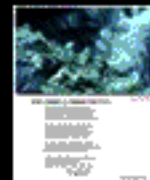
*Between the stars,
how far;*

X



*Words gently end at the
edge of the Unsayable . . .*

XXIX



*And to the rushing
waters speak: I am.*

XIII



*Be ahead of all
departure,*

XIV



See the flowers,

FIRST PART



(Image: Cloud of Starlings, Fall Poplar—North America)

Sonnets to Orpheus I [FIRST PART]

There rose a tree. O pure transcendence!
O Orpheus sings! O high tree of the ear.
And all was still. Yet in the stillness
new beginning, summoning, and change sprang forth.

From the silence, creatures pushed out
of the clear, open forest from lair and nest;
and then it happened, that they were not
so quiet because of cunning or fear,

but because of listening. Shrieks, cries, roars
seemed small in their hearts. And where once
scarcely a hut stood to receive this,

a crude shelter made of the darkest of longings
with trembling posts at its entrance way,—
there you created a temple in their hearing.

*Rainer Maria Rilke
(tr. Cliff Crego)*



(Image: The Sound of White Water Rushing—the Alps)

Sonnets to Orpheus III [FIRST PART]

A god can do it. But tell me, how shall
a man follow him through the narrow lyre?
His senses are split. At the crossing of two
heartways stands no temple for Apollo.

Song, as you teach him, is not desire,
not the touting of some final achievement;
Song is Being. Easy for a god.
But when are we to be? And when does he turn

towards our existence the Earth and the Stars?
This is nothing, young one, that you love, when
the voice pushes the mouth open,—learn

to forget such murmurings. They will pass.
True singing is a different kind of breath.
A breath around nothing. A sigh in a god. A wind.

Rainer Maria Rilke (tr. Cliff Crego)



(Image: House Leeks with Clovers, south-facing rockgarden, end of June—the Alps)

Sonnets to Orpheus V [FIRST PART]

Erect no monument. Let but the rose
flower each year on his behalf.
For Orpheus *is*. His metamorphosis
is in all things. We should not burden

ourselves with other names. Now and forever
Orpheus is when there is song. He comes and goes.
Isn't it already enough when he outlasts
the bowl of roses but by a few day?

O how he must disappear, so that you may understand!
Even when he himself worries about disappearing.
In that his word the present moment transcends,

he is already there, where you are not accompanied.
The lyre's lattice doesn't force his hands.
And he obeys, in that he transgresses.

Rainer Maria Rilke (tr. Cliff Crego)



Sonnets to Orpheus VII

[FIRST PART]

Only in the fields of Praise may Complaint
go, the nymphs of the plaintive spring,
watching over our defeats,
that they would be clear on the same rock

that carries the arch and the altars.—
See, on her quiet shoulders dawns
the feeling that she was the youngest
among the siblings of sentiment.

Joy *knows*, and Longing remains constant,—
only Complaint still learns; with a girl's hands
she counts through the nights the old wrongs.

But then suddenly, unpracticed and askew,
she fetches a star-image of our voice
in the night sky, one that doesn't cloud her breath.

Rainer Maria Rilke
(tr. Cliff Crego)

(Image: At Timberline, Summer's End. looking East—the Alps)



(Image: Summer Rockgarden, on granite—the Alps)

Sonnets to Orpheus IX [FIRST PART]

Only he who has lifted his lyre
also among the shadows
may his boundless praise
possibly repay.

Only he who has eaten poppies
with the dead,
will never again lose even
the softest of sounds.

Though the pool's reflection
often blurs before us:
Know the image.

First in the double world
do voices become
eternal and mild.

Rainer Maria Rilke (tr. Cliff Crego)



(Image: Paradise Lilies, south-facing slope, end of June—the Alps)

Sonnets to Orpheus XII [FIRST PART]

Hail to the spirit that would connect us;
in that we live truly in figures.
And with small steps pass the hours
beside our authentic day.

Without knowing our true place,
we are moved to action by real relation.
Antennae feel antennae,
carried by empty distance . . .

Pure tension. O Music of powers!
Is not through this venial industry
every disturbance deflected from you?

Even when the farmer cares and toils,
to that place where the seed itself transforms,
he does not reach. The Earth bestows.

Rainer Maria Rilke (tr. Cliff Crego)



(Image: Purple Gentian—the Alps)

Sonnets to Orpheus XIV [FIRST PART]

We are involved with flower, grapeleaf, fruit.
They speak not just the language of the year.
Out of the darkness rises colorful revelation,
having perhaps the shine on it of the jealousy

of the dead, who strengthen the earth.
What do we know of the part they play?
It has always been their nature, with their
free marrow, to invigorate the clay.

But still we ask: do they enjoy doing it? . . .
Does this fruit, the work of heavy slaves,
fortified, press up to us, to their Masters?

Or are they the Masters, those who sleep with roots
and grant us out of their superabundance
this hybrid thing made of mute energy and kisses.

Rainer Maria Rilke (tr. Cliff Crego)



(Photo: Late summer Fireweed—the Alps)

Sonnets to Orpheus XVIII [FIRST PART]

Do you hear the New, Lord,
rumbling and shaking?
Prophets are coming
who shall exalt it.

Truly, no hearing is whole
around such noise,
and yet the machine's part
too will have its praise.

See, the machine:
how it turns and takes its toll
and pushes aside and weakens us.

Though it draws energy from us,
it, without passion,
drives on and serves.

Rainer Maria Rilke (tr. Cliff Crego)



(Image: Looking East, Rhine River Watershed—the Alps)

Sonnets to Orpheus XIX [FIRST PART]

Even when the world swiftly changes,
as the form of clouds,
all things completed fall
back into the Primordial.

Above stride and change,
further and freer,
your prelude endures,
god with a lyre.

Sufferings have not been seen,
Love has not been learned,
and what removes us in Death,

has not been revealed.
Only the song over the land
hallows and rejoices.

*Rainer Maria Rilke
(tr. Cliff Crego)*



(Photo: Dwarf Pines, Alpine Moor—end of March, the Alps)

Sonnets to Orpheus XXI [FIRST PART]

Spring has again returned. The Earth
is like a child that knows many poems,
many, o so many For the hardship
of such long learning she receives the prize.

Strict was her teacher. The white
in the old man's beard pleases us.
Now, what to call green, to call blue,
we dare to ask: she knows, she knows!

Earth, now free, you happy one, play
with the children. We want to catch you,
joyful Earth. Only the most joyful can do it.

O, what her teacher taught her, such plenitude,
and that which is pressed into roots and long
heavy, twisted trunks: she sings, she sings!

Rainer Maria Rilke (tr. Cliff Crego)



(Image: Wild Granite Ridgeline, before Fall snows—the Alps)

Sonnets to Orpheus XXII

[FIRST PART]

We are the driving ones.
But the march of Time
takes him as but a trifle
into the ever-permanent.

Everything which hurries
will soon be over;
for it is the lingering
that first initiates us.

Young ones, o put your mettle
not into the quick achievement,
not into the attempted flight.

Everything is now at rest:
Darkness and light,
blossom and book.

Rainer Maria Rilke
(tr. Cliff Crego)

SECOND PART



(Image: New Snow, Mountain Fall; November—the Alps)

Sonnets to Orpheus I

[SECOND PART]

Breathing, you invisible poem!
Ceaselessly going round your own
Being pure exchanged worldspace. Counterpoise,
in which I rhythmically reclaim myself.

Solitary waves, whose
gradual sea I am;
you the sparest of all possible seas,—
space rewon.

How many of the these regions of space/
have already been inside of me. Many winds
are as if they were my son.

Do you recognize me, air, full of places once my own?
You, once smooth rind,
curve and leaf of my words.

Rainer Maria Rilke
(tr. Cliff Crego)



(Image: Cottongrass Moor—the Alps)

Sonnets to Orpheus IV [SECOND PART]

O this is the creature that does not exist.
They knew nothing and yet without a doubt
—his gait, his posture, his neck, down
to the silent light of his gaze—they had loved.

Indeed, it wasn't real. But because they loved,
it became a pure animal. Always, they gave it space.
And in that space, clear and spare
it raised lightly its head and needed scarcely

to be. They nourished it not with grain,
but with only the possibility that it truly was.
And this gave such strength to the animal

that it grew a horn from its brow. But one horn.
It passed in its whiteness a young maiden—
and appeared in the silver mirror, and in her.

*Rainer Maria Rilke
(tr. Cliff Crego)*



(Image: Ox-eye Daisies and Windflowers (Anemones (Pulsatilla alpina))—the Alps)

Sonnets to Orpheus V [SECOND PART]

Flower-muscle, that the windflower
morning meadow gradually encloses,
till the polyphonic light of the shrill
heavens pours into its womb,

in the outstretched muscle of the quiet
flower-star of infinite reception,
many times so overpowered with fullness,
that the moment's rest before darkness

can hardly return to you the once
again hastened back edges of leaves:
you, resolution and power of how many worlds!

We, the violent ones, we last longer.
But when, in which of all lives,
are we finally open and receivers.

Rainer Maria Rilke (tr. Cliff Crego)



(Photo: Staghorn Summac Fall—North America)

Sonnets to Orpheus X [SECOND PART]

All achievement is threatened by the machine, as long
as it dares to take its place in the mind, instead of obeying.
That the master's hand no longer shines forth in fine lingerings,
now it cuts to the determined design more rigidly the stone.

Nowhere does it remain behind, that for once we might escape
as it oils and abides by itself in the silent factories.
It has become Life,—it thinks it can do everything best
and with like determination orders and creates and destroys.

And yet for us Being is still enchanted, on a hundred
planes is still origin. A play of pure energies
touched by no one who has not knelt down and is amazed.

Words gently end at the edge of the Unsayable . . .
And Music, ever new, out the most trembling of stones,
builds in unusable space its deified house.

Rainer Maria Rilke (tr. Cliff Cregg)



(Image: Shepherd's Hut, spring snowmelt; May—the Alps)

Sonnets to Orpheus XIII [SECOND PART]

Be ahead of all departure, as if it were already
behind you, like the winter which is almost over.
For among winters there is one so endlessly winter,
that, wintering through it, may your heart survive.

Be forever dead in Eurydice—, singing ascent,
praising ascent, returning to pure relation.
Here, among the disappearing, be, in the realm of decline,
be the ringing glass that shatters even as it sounds.

Be—and yet know Not-being's condition,
the infinite ground of your innermost movement,
that you may bring it to completion but this one time.

To that which used-up, as to nature's abundant
dumb and mute supply, the unsayable sums,
joyfully add yourself and the result destroy.

Rainer Maria Rilke (tr. Cliff Crego)



Sonnets to Orpheus XIV

[SECOND PART]

See the flowers, they who are true to the earthly,
to whom we lend Fate from Fate's edge,—
but who knows! when they their faded ones repent,
is it left to us, to be the repenter for them.

Everything wants to float. We go about like weights,
laying ourselves on everything, from heaviness enthralled;
o how we are things for weakened teachers,
for they have achieved eternal childhood.

If they were to take one in inner slumber and sleep
deeply with things—: o how he would become light,
different to a different day, out of the common depths.

Or he would remain perhaps; as they flowered and praised
him, the converted one, who now is their equal,
silent siblings all among the winds of the meadows.

Rainer Maria Rilke
(tr. Cliff Crego)

(Image: Arnica with Butterfly, at timberline—the Alps)



(Image: Springwater Fountain, late May at 1800 meters—the Alps)

Sonnets to Orpheus XV

[SECOND PART]

O fountain mouth, giver, you mouth which
speaks inexhaustibly of that one, pure thing,—
you, mask of marble placed before
the water's flowing face. In the background

the aqueducts' source. Further, beyond
all the graves, on the slopes of the Apennines,
they bring you your stories, that then,
upon the black aging of your chin,

pour over into the vessel below.
This is the ear that sleeps, laid down,
the ear of marble, into which you always speak.

An ear of the Earth. Only with herself
alone does she thus converse. Insert a jug,
and it seems to her that you interrupt.

Rainer Maria Rilke
(tr. Cliff Crego)



Sonnets to Orpheus XVI [SECOND PART]

Torn away from us again and again
is the god of the place which heals.
We are sharp-edged, for we have to know,
but he is [un]divided and serene.

Even the pure, the consecrated gift
he declines to take into his world
for, unmoved, he stands contrary
to the unfettered conclusion.

Only the dead drink
from the spring heard by us here,
when the god silently waves to them, the dead.

For us, noise is all that is offered.
And the lamb, out of a more quiet
instinct, begs for its bell.

Rainer Maria Rilke (tr. Cliff Crego)



(Image: Child, before mountain rain—the Alps)

Sonnets to Orpheus XX [SECOND PART]

Between the stars, how far; and yet, as one learns from that which is close,
between how many things still further.

One, for instance, a child . . . And next to it, another—
o how incomprehensibly far removed.

Fate, perhaps it measures us with spans of being
that appear to us strange;
Think of how many spans there are from girl to man,
when she both shuns and watches him.

Everything if far—, and nowhere does the circle close.
See the plate on the gaily prepared table,
how uncommon the fish's face.

Fish are mute . . . , one once thought. Who knows?
But in the end, is there not a place where one, what for
fish would be language, without them speaks?

Rainer Maria Rilke (tr. Cliff Crego)



(Image: Fall Ice, Mountain Spring—the Alps)

Sonnets to Orpheus XXIX [SECOND PART]

Silent friend of many distances, feel
how your breath still multiplies all space.
In the darkness of the belfry's high beams,
let yourself ring. That which weakens you

will grow strong on such nourishment.
Move in and out of transformation.
What is your most painful experience?
Is the drinking bitter, then become wine.

Be in this night of a thousand excesses,
magic power at the crossroads of your senses,
the meaning of their rare encounter.

And when the earthly has forgotten you,
say to the quiet land: I flow.
And to the rushing waters speak: I am.

*Rainer Maria Rilke
(tr. Cliff Crego)*

21 selected poems
with new translations
and photographs
by Cliff Crego

*All but two of the photographs
were made in the central
European Alps,
very close to where
Rilke composed his 55
Sonnets to Orpheus in 1922.*

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