

RAINER MARIA RILKE

THE LAY OF LOVE
AND DEATH
OF CORNET CHRISTOPH RILKE

English version

“... the 24th of November 1663 Otto von Rilke / of Langenau / Gränitz and Ziegra / at Linda was enfeoffed with the share of the Linda estate left by his brother Christoph, fallen in Hungary; but he had to make out a reversion / by which the feudal tenure would become null and void / in case his brother Christoph (who according to the death certificate presented had died as Cornet in the Baron of Pirovano’s Company of the Imperial Austrian Heyster Regiment of Horse) should return ...”

I

Riding, riding, riding, through the day, through the night, through the day.

Riding, riding, riding.

And courage is grown so weary, and longing so great. There are no hills any more, hardly a tree. Nothing dares stand up. Alien huts crouch thirstily by mired springs. Nowhere a tower. And always the same picture. One has two eyes too many. Only in the night sometimes one seems to know the road. Perhaps we always retrace by night the stretch we have won laboriously in the foreign sun? Maybe. The sun is heavy, as with us deep in summer at home. But we took our leave in summer. The women’s dresses shone long out of the green. And we have been riding long.

So it must be autumn. At least there, where sorrowful women know of us.

2

He of Langenau shifts in his saddle and says: “Marquis ...”

His neighbor, the little fine Frenchman, has been talking and laughing these three days. Now he has nothing more to say. He is like a child that wants to sleep. Dust settles on his fine white lace

collar; he does not notice it. He is slowly wilting in his velvet saddle. But von Langenau smiles and says: "You have strange eyes, Marquis. Surely you must look like your mother –"
At that the little fellow blossoms out again and dusts his collar off and is like new.

3

Someone is telling of his mother. A German, evidently. Loud and slow he sets his words. As a girl, binding flowers, thoughtfully tests flower after flower, not yet knowing what the whole will come to –: so he fits his words. For joy? For sorrow? All listen. Even the spitting stops. For these are gentlemen every one, who know what is proper. And whoever speaks no German in the crowd suddenly understands it, feels individual words: "At evening" ... "was little ..."

4

Now are they all close to one another, these gentlemen who come out of France and out of Burgundy, out of the Netherlands, out of Carinthia's valleys, from the castles of Bohemia and from the Emperor Leopold. For what this one tells they too have experienced, and just as he has. As though there were but one mother ...

5

So they ride into the evening, into any evening. They are silent again, but they have the bright words with them. The Marquis doffs his helmet. His dark hair is soft, and, as he bows his head, it spreads like a woman's about his neck. Now von Langenau too is aware: Far off something rises into the radiance, something slender, dark. A lonely column, half ruined. And when they are long past, later, it occurs to him that that was a Madonna.

6

Watch-fire. They sit round about and wait. Wait for someone to sing. But they are so tired. The red light is heavy. It lies on the dusty boots. It crawls up to the knees, it peers into the folded hands. It has no wings. The faces are dark. Even so, the eyes of the little Frenchman glow for a while with a light of their own. He has kissed a little rose, and now it may wither on upon his breast. Von Langenau has seen it, because he cannot sleep. He thinks: I have no rose, none. Then he sings. And it is an old, sad song that at home the girls in the fields sing, in the fall, when the harvests are coming to an end.

7

Says the little Marquis: "You are very young, sir?"
And von Langenau, in sorrow half and half defiant: "Eighteen." Then they are silent.
Later the Frenchman asks: "Have you too a bride at home, Junker?"
"You?" returns von Langenau.
"She is blond like you."
And they are silent again until the German cries: "But then why the devil do you sit in the saddle and ride through this poisonous country to meet the Turkish dogs?"
The Marquis smiles: "In order to come back again."
And von Langenau grows sad. He thinks of a blond girl with whom he played. Wild games. And he would like to go home, for an instant only, only for so long as it takes to say the words: "Magdalena – my having always been like that, forgive!"
What – been? thinks the young man. – And they are far away.

8

One day, at morning, a horseman appears, and then a second, four, ten. All in iron, huge. Then a thousand behind: the army.

One must separate.

“Return safely home, Marquis. –”

“The Virgin protects you, Junker.”

And they cannot part. They are friends of a sudden, brothers. Have more to confide in each other; for they already know so much each of the other. They linger. And there’s haste and hoofbeat about them. Then the Marquis strips off his great right glove. He fetches out the little rose, takes a petal from it. As one would break a host.

“That will safeguard you. Fare well.”

Von Langenau is surprised. He gazes long after the Frenchman. Then he shoves the foreign petal under his tunic. And it rises and falls on the waves of his heart. Bugle-call. He rides to the army, the Junker. He smiles sadly: an unknown woman protects him.

9

A day through the baggage-train. Curses, colors, laughter –: the countryside is dazzling with it. Come colorful boys a-running. Brawling and calling. Come wenches with crimson hats amid their full-flowing hair. Beckonings. Come men-at-arms, black-iron as wandering night. Seize the hussies hotly, that their clothes tear. Press them against the drum’s edge. And at the wilder struggling of hasty hands the drums awake; as in a dream they rumble, rumble –. And at evening they hold out lanterns to him, strange ones: wine, gleaming in iron headpieces. Wine? Or blood? – Who can distinguish?

IO

At last with Spork. Beside his white horse the Count towers. His long hair has the gleam of iron.

Von Langenau has not asked. He recognizes the General, swings from his horse and bows in a cloud of dust. He brings a letter commending him to the Count's favor. But the Count commands: "Read me the scrawl." And his lips have not moved. He does not need them for this; they're just good enough for cursing. Anything further his right hand says. Period. And one can tell by the look of it. The young man has finished long ago. He no longer knows where he is standing. Spork is in front of everything. Even the sky is gone. Then Spork, the great General, says:

"Cornet."

And that is much.

II

The company is lying beyond the Raab. Langenau rides toward it, alone. Level land. Evening. The studdings of his saddle-bow gleam through the dust. And then the moon rises. He sees that by his hands. He dreams.

But then something shrieks at him.

Shrieks, shrieks,
rends his dream.

That is no owl. Mercy:
the only tree shrieks at him:
man!

And he looks: something rears – a body rears itself against the tree,
and a young woman,
bloody and bare,
assails him: Let me loose!

And down he springs into the black green
and hews the hot ropes through;
and he sees her glances glow
and her teeth bite.

Is she laughing?

He shudders.

And already he has mounted his horse and chases into the night.
Bloody ties fast in his fist.

I 2

Von Langenau is writing a letter, deep in thought. Slowly he traces
in great, earnest, upright letters:

“My good mother,
be proud: I carry the flag,
be free of care: I carry the flag,
love me: I carry the flag –”

Then he puts the letter away inside his tunic, in the most secret place,
beside the roseleaf. And thinks: It will soon take on that fragrance.
And thinks: Perhaps someone will find it someday ... And thinks:
... For the enemy is near.

I 3

They ride over a slain peasant. His eyes are wide open and something
is mirrored in them; no heaven. Later, hounds howl. So a village is
coming, at last. And above the hovels stonily rises a castle. Broad the
bridge presents itself before them. Great grows the gate. High welcomes

the horn. Hark: rumble, clatter, and barking of dogs! Neighing in the courtyard, hoof-beat and hailing.

I 4

Rest! To be a guest for once. Not always oneself to supply one's wishes with scanty fare. Not always to seize things, enemy-like; for once to let things happen to one and to know: what happens is good. Courage too must stretch out for once and at the hem of silken covers turn over on itself. Not always to be a soldier. For once to wear one's hair loose and the broad open collar and to sit upon silken settles and be to the very fingertips as ... after the bath. And to begin again learning what women are. And how the white ones do and how the blue ones are; what sort of hands they have, how they sing their laughter, when blond boys bring the beautiful bowls weighted with juice-laden fruits.

I 5

It began as a supper. And became a feast, one hardly knows how. The high flames flared, voices whirled, tangled songs jangled out of glass and glitter, and at last from the ripe-grown measures: forth sprang the dance. And swept them all away. That was a beating of waves in the halls, a meeting together and a choosing of each other, a parting with each other and a finding again, a rejoicing in the radiance and a blinding in the light and a swaying in the summer winds that are in the costumes of warm women. Out of dark wine and a thousand roses runs the hour rushing into the dream of night.

I 6

And one there is who stands and stares at this splendor. And he is so made that he waits whether to come awake. Because in sleep alone one sees such state and such feasts of such women: their slightest gesture is a fold falling in brocade. They build up hours out of silvery discourses, and sometimes lift their hands up: so —, and you must think that somewhere whither you cannot reach, they break soft roses that you do not see. And then you dream: to be adorn'd with these and be elsewhere blest, and earning a crown for your brow that is empty.

I 7

One, who wears white silk, now knows that he cannot wake; for he is awake and bewildered with reality. So he flees fearfully into the dream and stands in the park, lonely in the black park. And the feast is far. And the light lies. And the night is near about him and cool. And he asks a woman, who leans to him:

“Are you the night?”

She smiles.

And at that he is ashamed for his white dress.

And wants to be far and alone and in armor.

All in armor.

I 8

“Have you forgotten that you are my page for this day? Are you leaving me? Where are you going? Your white dress gives me right over you —.”

“Do you long for your coarse coat?”

“Are you cold? – Are you homesick?”

The Countess smiles.

No. But that is only because the being a child has fallen from his shoulders, that soft dark dress. Who has taken it away? “You?” he asks in a voice he has not yet heard. “You!”

And now he has nothing on. And he is naked as a saint. Bright and slender.

19

Slowly the castle lights go out. Everyone is heavy: tired or in love or drunk. After so many empty, long nights in the field: beds. Broad oaken beds. Here one prays otherwise than in a wretched furrow on the way, which, as one falls asleep, becomes like a grave.

“Lord God, as thou willest!”

Shorter are the prayers in bed.

But more heartfelt.

20

The tower room is dark.

But they light each other's faces with their smiles. They grope before them like blind people and find each the other as they would a door. Almost like children who dread the night, they press close into each other. And yet they are not afraid. There is nothing that might be against them: no yesterday, no morrow; for time is shattered. And they flower from its ruins.

He does not ask: “Your husband?”

She does not ask: “Your name?”

For indeed they have found each other, to be unto themselves a new generation.

They will give each other a hundred new names and take them all off again, gently, as one takes an ear-ring off.

21

In the antechamber over a settle hangs the tunic, the bandolier, and the cloak of him of Langenau. His gloves lie on the floor. His flag stands steeply, leaned against the window-cross. It is black and slender. Outside a storm drives over the sky, making pieces of the night, white ones and black ones. The moonlight goes by like a long lightning-flash, and the unstirring flag has restless shadows. It dreams.

22

Was a window open? Is the storm in the house? Who is slamming the doors? Who goes through the rooms? – Let be. No matter who. Into the tower room he will not find his way. As behind a hundred doors is this great sleep two people have in common; as much in common as one mother or one death.

23

Is this the morning? What sun is rising? How big is the sun? Are those birds? Their voices are everywhere.

All is bright, but it is not day.

All is loud, but not with the voices of birds.

It is the timbers that shine. It is the windows that scream. And they scream, red, into the foes that stand outside in the flickering land, scream: Fire!

And with torn sleep in their faces they all throng through, hall iron, half naked, from room to room, from wing to wing, and seek the stair.

And with broken breath horns stammer in the court:

Muster, muster!

And quaking drums.

24

But the flag is not there.
Cries: Cornet!
Careering horses, prayers, shouts,
Curses: Cornet!
Iron on iron, signal, command;
Stillness: Cornet!
And once again: Cornet!
And away with the thundering cavalcade.

But the flag is not there.

25

He is running a race with burning halls, through doors that press him close, red-hot, over stairs that scorch him, he breaks forth out of the raging pile. Upon his arms he carries the flag like a white, insensible woman. And he finds a horse, and it's like a cry: away over all, passing everything by, even his own men. And then the flag comes to itself again, and it has never been so kingly; and now they all see it, far ahead, and know the shining, helmetless man and know the flag ... But, behold, it begins to glow, flings itself out and grows wide and red ...

Their flag is aflame in the enemy's midst, and they gallop after.

26

He of Langenau is deep in the enemy, but all alone. Terror has ringed a space around him, and he halts, in the very middle, under the slowly dying flare of his flag.
Slowly, almost reflectively, he gazes about him. There is much that is

strange, motley, before him. Gardens – he thinks and smiles. But then he feels that eyes are holding him and is aware of men and knows that these are the heathen dogs –: and casts his horse into their midst.

But, as he is now closed in on from behind, they are indeed gardens again, and the sixteen curved sabres that leap upon him, flash on flash, are a party.

A laughing fountain.

The tunic was burnt in the castle, the letter and the roseleaf of an unknown woman. –

In the spring of the next year (it came sad and cold) a courier of the Baron of Pirovano rode slowly into Langenau. There he saw an old woman weep.

“The Lay of the Love and Death of Cornet Christopher Rilke”
(W. W. Norton & Company, 1963)
Courtesy W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
English translation by M. D. Herter Norton

