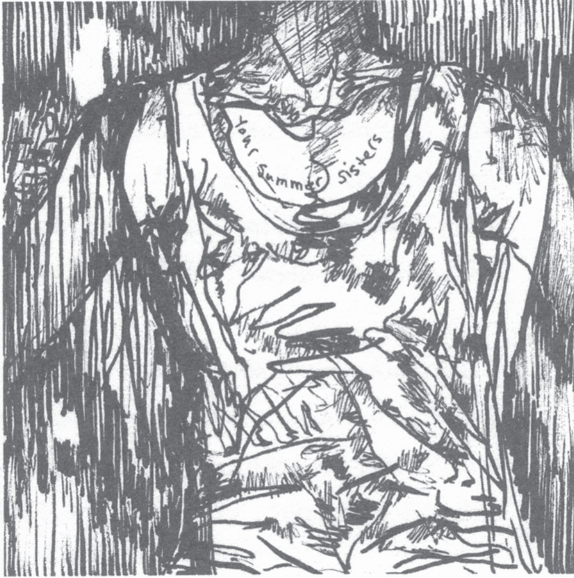
Night Made of Many Many Bright Roses



a review-essay on

Roses

The Late French Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke
Translated and with essays by David Need
Illustrated by Clare Johnson
Horse & Buggy Press ($30)

by Sumita Chakraborty

for Melissa Green

Rosennacht, Rosennacht. // Nacht aus Rosen, Nacht aus vielen vielen / hellen Rosen

—Rainer Maria Rilke, “Today I want you to feel the love of Roses”

We make world or place through a gesture in which an image is realized.

—David Need, “The Impossible Affordance of the Rose”

When I started this piece, I didn't think I was writing an essay. I thought I was writing a short review of a new translation of one of Rilke's late-in-life volumes in French, *Les Roses*. *Roses: The Late French Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke* is a limited-edition release from the independent Horse & Buggy press; it's Rilke's *Les Roses* translated by David Need, a poet and scholar of religion, and illustrated by Clare Johnson, a British artist. It's bilingual, holding all twenty-seven of Rilke's French poems and Need's English translations; Johnson's corresponding illustrations, one per poem, follow each of Need's lyrics. Need's own essays follow, and, after that, the book has a lengthy appendix containing translations of Rilke's German-language poems that also contain the rose.

My introduction to Rilke was *Sonnets to Orpheus*, and afterward came *The Duino Elegies*, which, as is the case for so many other readers, became rapidly not only my primary point of interest in Rilke but also one of the main thrums that captivated me with poetry in general. Somehow, although I read French and

not German, the French verse had never quite caught my eye, and although I'd certainly never objected to it, the rose had never been one of my favorites of Rilke's images.

Things change. On June 9, 2014, my younger sister died without illness or preamble at the age of twenty-four. In July, I picked up Need and Johnson's volume by chance at the Grolier Poetry Book Shop in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was my first time visiting home after my sister's cremation. This essay was the first piece of critical prose I wrote since my sister died; I began it because I needed to start to think in prose again, and I chose this book so that I could try to understand why it—and Rilke's roses in particular—felt like the only space in which I could do so.

In July of 1926, Rilke sent Marina Tsvetayeva a copy of *Vergers* (*Orchards*), his recently published volume of poems in French. In her response, Tsvetayeva writes:

> Writing poetry is in itself translating, from the mother tongue into another, whether French or German should make no difference. No language is the mother tongue. Writing poetry is rewriting it. That's why I am puzzled when people talk of French or Russian, etc., poets. A poet may write in French, but he cannot be a French poet. That's ludicrous.

I'll hazard a guess that Rilke would have agreed: as Adam Zagajewski has it,

"to settle between languages and traditions, on a kind of San Andreas Fault of cultures, was just right for him."[1]

A. Poulin, Jr. and many since have remarked on the sheer volume of Rilke's late work in French. Although he had written in French before (and many other languages besides), as Poulin writes, Rilke's output during his last years was unprecedented: "in only four years Rilke wrote more poems in a language foreign to him than most poets write in their native tongue during an entire lifetime." The most frequently cited explanation for this is Boris Pasternak's, found in a 1953 letter to the poet Kaisyn Kuliyev:

> Probably he felt that he had exhausted his expressive possibilities in German (all abstractions and generalizations), and felt it was impossible to turn back to what he had begun with (even though it was basic to all his poetry), whereas if he resorted to French he could make a new beginning.

But I think Tsvetayeva's take on language strikes closer to home—or, to be more specific, to what a linguistic home can mean for a poet often referred to as homeless, as residing on fault lines. In the copy of *Vergers* that Rilke sent her, he'd inscribed some lines of verse:

> *Marina: voici galets et coquillages*
> *ramassés récemment à la française plage*
> *de mon* étrange *coeur . . . (J'aimerais que tu connusses*

toutes les étendues *de son diverse paysage*
dupuis sa côte bleue
jusqu'à ses plaines russes.)

Loosely: "Marina: here are some flints and seashells / just collected from the French shore / of my strange heart . . . (I would that you knew / all extents of its varied landscape / from its blue coast / to its Russian plains.)."

In this inscription, Rilke's homelessness becomes a kind of home-omnipresence. Where Pasternak speaks of a fresh and fresh-faced start, Rilke speaks instead of an internal "paysage," one that already contains pieces of France and the fields of Russia—and much else besides, as he implies with "toutes les étendues," and by outlining a geography from a blue coast to Russian plains without naming what lies between. "No language is the mother tongue," declares Tsvetayeva; Rilke's "étrange coeur" seems to agree, and add that as a result, every language becomes as much a mother as the other.[2]

Perhaps this has something to do with why I've always found Rilke's poems a true home, even though I haven't yet read them the bulk of his oeuvre in the original. I'm drawn to a great deal in Rilke—he's wild, pensive, vulnerable, livid, quiet, romantic, and terrifying all at once. Beyond and beneath those traits, though, I especially gravitate toward his tendency to turn homelessness into rampant home-building. The flints and seashells he talks about when he describes this tendency, and the infinitely long shore on which he pictures them lying: these feel intimately recognizable to me, as though I may well have taken pictures of

them with the disposable Kodaks I used as a kid.

I'm dying to learn German. But as far as Rilke goes, that yearning doesn't keep me from returning to the translations I've loved, and not knowing the language doesn't make me question my love for them, either. In his 1988 essay "The Rilke Boom," Sven Birkerts writes that Rilke "has engendered so much activity among translators of late that it almost seems he is still out there, producing." "Raum, Weltraum, Innerweltraum (space, 'worldspace,' consciousness)—there's more going on in the German lyrics than English can handle," remarks Drew Calvert in 2014 in an essay in *The American Reader*, adding: "But English readers are still invited to apprehend his message."

In a related variation on this theme, Marjorie Perloff's 2001 review of William Gass's *Reading Rilke* discusses the large number of twentieth-century and contemporary poets drawn to Rilke's work. Perloff writes of her frustration with "the cult-like worship of a poet by later poets who can barely read the poetry in question," and one of her conclusions is that much of "the current Rilke cult has to do with our nostalgia for a time of poetic commitment."

But Perloff's explanation doesn't ring true to my own experience: as a teen I fled a house riven by domestic violence, and when I encountered Rilke through *Orpheus* in a college class on the origins of lyric poetry, the emotion I felt thinking about "a time of poetic commitment" wasn't nostalgia—which implies some sort of recognition, a hope that such a thing could be a possibility for oneself—but rage. The idea reminded me of well-heeled classmates I'd never fit in with, people

who—like Rilke—managed one way or another to find a benefactor with a tower or a well-situated hotel room, a princess who filled a parlor full of roses for you when she wanted to hear your poems.

I didn't learn any of this about Rilke until years later, when that rage had cooled and morphed into intrigue, but I remain far from nostalgic, and not even in the ballpark of wistful, about this dream of being a kept writer. I know more about humping and hustling along paycheck to paycheck, and since Orpheus was my doorway into Rilke's work, I first knew Rilke as a writer obsessed with a mythological man who went on to sing after damning the woman he loves to the underworld simply because he looked back at her. In other words: while I'd love not to have to compare price tags, or wonder what it will take to get it through to NSTAR that I did indeed pay my final bill before moving away from Boston, I don't put stock in the idea of a poet with a capital "p," and Rilke's privileges and plenties didn't initiate me into his cult. His lack of a home, which he turned into homes everywhere and everlasting, did.

The artery that runs through stories about Rilke writing in French is the French word *absence*, especially in the "great positive" sense in which Valéry uses it. In a sense, this artery is the sibling of Rilke's take on homelessness: from nothing springs everything. It's fitting, then, that while Rilke's attraction to *absence*—as well as a few other French words—contributed to his affinity for the language, it's no stranger to his other verse, too.[3] Robert Hass, for example, links Rilke's

interest in *absence* to his interest in Orpheus:

> For what Orpheus has done is to turn the hut of our emptiness into something positive, into a temple, and that is also apparently what Rilke felt Valéry had done. The project of his poetry, then, was to find in art a way to transform the emptiness, the radical deficiency, of human longing into something else.

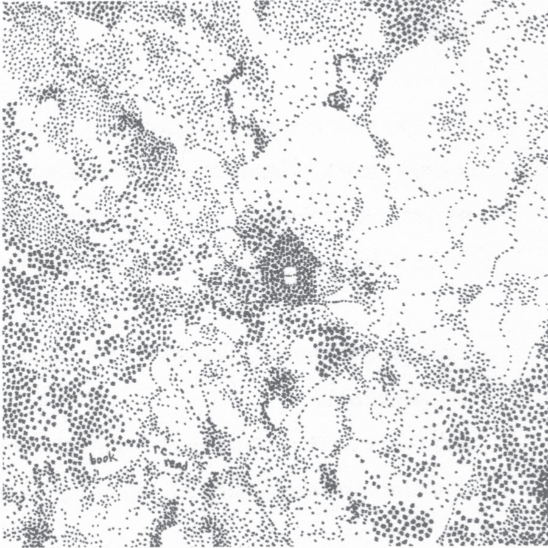
Which, through *Sonnets to Orpheus*, brings me to the image of the rose:

> Erect no gravestone to his memory; just
> let the rose blossom each year for his sake.[4]

Shortly after my sister died, my friend Melissa, to whom I dedicate this essay, wrote me a letter. When her father died, she said, she planted a Rose of Sharon at her family's farm, so that "as long as I could imagine, something beautiful was growing in his place. It was more beautiful year after year." She offered to help me do something similar.

I still can't figure out where I'd place the plant, or what kind of plant it should be: the home in which my sister died was a sad and traumatic one. And if my love for Rilke comes from my recognition of his penchant for turning homelessness and emptiness into strange seashores and rosebeds, my sister's life had taken a different turn: she had burrowed into the places she was told her home *had* to be, even if it gave her no joy.

But my mother and I will be taking Melissa up on her offer, even though we know almost nothing about what exactly it would entail. Coursing through Melissa's Rose of Sharon for her father, and through my mother's and my hypothetical blooms for my sister, is the same dream that animates the above lines from *Orpheus*: the goal of turning the silhouette which forms when a life departs a body into grounds for something beautiful, mysterious, and living, a temple from a hut which each year provides new hues and shapes.



It's hardly extraordinary for a poet to show an interest in the rose. But the significations of Rilke's roses, both metaphorical and literal, *are* unique. "Roses climb his life as if he were their trellis," writes Gass.[5] Beginning as early 1900, Rilke imagines roses into "empty and cold" places, reads their arrival in the spring

as “a most delightful promise,” and comes even to see their fading and dying as beauty.[6] Much like the French language and also Orpheus, Rilke’s rose is an emblem for promise and possibility coming from “absence.”

The shape of a rose bloom itself suggests this connection: as Need writes, a rose is “at once utterly and unfathomably hidden in its depths and, at the same time, endlessly expressed in the gestures of its unfolding.” Its eye—ovary, style, stigma, stamens, anthers, pollen—is obscured; all I can see is petal after petal, nestled in and around slivers of dark space. At one glance it seems like the petals grow from those shadows. At another it seems like the petals come from elsewhere, growing to shelter and enclose whatever lies in the middle.

The space at the center of the bloom is inscrutable. We know something lives there—sometimes I think I can even see, or at least imagine, a sliver of yellow pollen—but we can never quite see it well enough to know what it is, how large it is, what shape it takes. So it becomes an “impossible space,” as Need writes, an imagined space—“the space (*l’espace*) or the inner room (*raum*) of the roses.”

Rilke’s primary residence late in life was the famous Muzot, but *Les Roses* was written in a different and altogether more idyllic location. In a setup that would perfectly fit Perloff’s suggestion that our admiration for Rilke is based on our desire to star with him in *Freaky Friday*, two of Rilke’s many benefactors had reserved “the best room at the Savoy Hotel” for him, “with a magnificent view

of the lake." As the story goes, "in the luxurious change from his tower a further cycle of poems in French came readily, more than twenty tender and beautiful variations, mostly in quatrain form, on one of his cherished themes, 'Les Roses.'" Rilke described this sojourn in a letter:

> . . . by way of compensation for the scarcely favorable summer, there were three truly radiant weeks in which the Wallis [the German for Valais, the canton in Switzerland in which Muzot is located] was itself again. Work too progressed in many directions: I wrote down for my own pleasure a little volume of Wallis verses, "Quatrains Valaisans", in which one or another experience of this landscape lightly took shape, and in addition a whole little cycle, "Les Roses", likewise French. All that only like cake-baking.

A collection of the descriptions of *Les Roses* from the above quotations: "tender," "for my own pleasure," "lightly," "little," "only . . . cake-baking." W. D. Snodgrass's description sounds a similar tone: to him, the volume arose from Rilke's "tendernesses."

But Snodgrass also quickly complicates this assessment. Citing Poulin's translation of the first poem in the rose cycle, Snodgrass describes Rilke's voice in these poems as one in which those tendernesses "converge into an urgent mouth."

Tender should not be considered unilaterally or simply *soft*, as the best tendernesses—the ones that haunt us and the ones to which we return—are

soft and nourishing but also contain depth, power, and need, like that "urgent mouth." Nor too can *pleasure* be held too far apart from the word *displeasure*, or even from the word *pain*. The word *lightness* can't be considered incompatible with the words *darkness* and *heft*, and applying the modifier *little* hardly indicates that the modified is not also massive.[7]

It doesn't make much sense to me that Rilke would elsewhere be invested in "find[ing] in art a way to transform the emptiness, the radical deficiency, of human longing into something else" and spontaneously, for a brief period of time and with regard to only a few poems, toss that concern utterly aside.

In the context of *Les Roses*, such a temporary departure seems even less likely, since Rilke felt that both French and roses are to emptiness as the alchemist is to dull metals. Moreover, at the same time, in the same hotel room, Rilke was also at work on "the first provisional version of a translation of Valéry's magnificent Eupalinos dialogue": it was Valéry's *absence*, after all, which had long before sirened Rilke into French.

That the verses in *Les Roses* are charming and slight is undeniable. That Rilke himself, as Prater chronicles, once remarked that his French poems were "superfluities" is also undeniable. In other words, as Poulin puts it, "To say that Rilke's French poems are not his 'major' work is to belabor the obvious."

But I have a fondness for minor work, as I find that, to return to Rilke's inscription to Tsvetayeva, although often overlooked like "galets et coquillages,"

they were formed by the same "étrange coeur" which wrote the major work. And—this is pure conjecture, but Rilke's assessment of *Les Roses* is what makes me wonder about it—I wonder if poets sometimes find in their minor work a space for lightness which major work cannot often accommodate, which in turn can actually complicate those heavy, major concerns.

I wonder if we don't recoil from the faintest whiff of tenderness and lightness sometimes, looking to our poets only for the urgent mouth that doesn't also go in for the gentle kiss. We shy away from words like "pretty," and if a table has roses on it, we come to that table with skepticism, trained to scoff because we've heard tell that roses are red and that violets are blue. But I submit that it in fact deepens the urgency and the ferocity of Rilke's overall project to watch him under the influence of both the voices of terrifying angels and the beckoning of soft blooms. They are not as dissimilar as they seem: even *Duino* says that "beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror." More to the point, I think that reading these kinds of contradictions in Rilke do not even require reading across his entire corpus: *Les Roses* contains both unabashed sweetness and the same earth-shattering fears that readers are drawn to elsewhere. Put simply, as Rilke's epitaph reads, "Rose, O pure contradiction."

That Rilke's eighth rose poem reads as an *ars poetica* is no accident. Here it is, as Need translates it:

> Too full of your dream,
> flower with so many within,

damp as one who weeps,
you lean towards the dawn.

Your sweet powers, that sleep
in an unsettled longing,
unfold these tender forms
between cheeks and breasts.

Need's translation does not flinch at the heavy, resounding echoes or the sweetness of the lines, retaining Rilke's "sweet" ("douces") and "tender" ("tendres"). The poem is graceful and gentle, "lean[ing] towards the dawn," and in them nevertheless unfold the grief of the image of "one who weeps," the "unsettled," those same concerns and preoccupations that Rilke returned to throughout his life.

Throughout the rose poems, in fact, imagery of books and writing is a constant. In the second rose poem, Rilke calls the flower a half-open book ("livre entrebàille") and a magic book ("livre-mage"); in the eighteenth, he describes roses as having "pages" ("pages" and "feuilles"), being "like dictionaries" ("comme des dictionnaires"), being "letters" ("épistolaires").

We need no other reminder that the rose poems are as much a product of Rilke's poetics as any of his other pieces than to notice that in *Les Roses*, Rilke consistently returns to this set of metaphors, as though implying that to write and read a rose is to write and read a book. And we need no other reminder that

those poetics come from an overarching interest in "unsettled longing"—"désir incertain"—than those exact words in the third-to-last line of the eighth in the cycle. The difference—and to me, it's a difference that adds rather than detracts value, particularly when read alongside his more thundering notes—is that in these poems, that unsettled desire leans gently toward our "cheeks and breasts."

I stand with Tsvetayeva's statement that writing poetry is translating, which mirrors Gass's claim that the "result" of an attempt at translation "is the record of a reading."

In *Reading Rilke*, Gass sometimes lists one phrase of Rilke's followed by several different translators' takes on it. The first line he renders this way is the first of the *Elegies*: he gives it to us in fifteen different ways, including in his own. Gass does this to discuss their comparative strengths and weaknesses, but beside that point, those pages of riffs thrilled me for what they imply about translation. I don't deny that some translations, like some poems, are better than others. But a thicket of interpretations—of responses-in-verse—is, to me, a better way to think about translation than the elusive hunt for one translation to reign supreme.

This is the spirit in which I approached Need's translation. In the case especially of *Roses*, with both Need's translations and predecessor Poulin's, comparative strengths and weaknesses are far more interwoven and fuzzy than in many of the lines from the *Elegies* to which Gass objects. What we are left with here,

then, is an opportunity to watch, listen to, and feel two different scores and choreographies.

In the first poem, for example, I want both Need's melodic opening and Poulin's ferocious close. "If your blooming sometimes so astonishes us, / happy rose," begins Need, his lines closely tracing the syntax, rhythm, and tone of Rilke's, which read, "Si ta fraîcheur parfois nous étonne tant, / heureuse rose." Poulin's decisions here—"If we're sometimes so amazed / by your freshness, happy rose"—are less effective for me. Poulin straightens out the circularity of the lines by placing the first-person plural pronoun before the second person one, reversing Rilke's syntax and diminishing the mimetic, rose bloom-like nature of the original. The rhythm of Poulin's line also seems less seductive to me, which mirrors my take on his choice of diction. On diction, particularly striking is what each translator does to "étonne": Poulin's selection of "amazed" is absolutely accurate, but in Need's "astonishes" lies the whisper of the French word's English cognate, "stunned."

But by the end of the poem, where we encounter that "urgent mouth" I mentioned in the last section, Poulin's decision to render Rilke's "bouche" more literally as "mouth" feels aptly visceral in a way that Need's "lips" doesn't. It is Poulin's definition of faithfulness that leads us to that gripping "mouth," even though the same definition of faithfulness made his first lines less arresting for me than Need's; similarly, Need's sensual lilting, so effective to me in the poem's first lines, is precisely what leads his poem to end with "lips" rather than Poulin's hungrier and more embodied "mouth."

The virtues and vices can't live apart from one another, and I want it all. I'm taken by Need's decision to translate "livre entrebâille" in the second poem as "book half-open" (Poulin selects "half-open book," which is an accurate conversion of French to English syntax but loses the tone of Rilke's line) and taken by Poulin's decision to translate Rilke's many uses of "ô" in the third poem as "O" (Need selects "oh," a breathier and less striking visual and sound). I love Need's willingness to allow his syntax to cascade in a way that resembles Rilke's many tumbling clauses (the first five lines of the seventh poem, and the twenty-third poem, are exceptional examples) and by Poulin's elegant and stark simplicities (his last three lines of the seventh,[8] as well as his take on "Ne parlons pas de toi" in the sixteenth).

Perhaps the most perplexing and useful instance of what's gained with an aggregate approach comes in the twenty-fourth poem. I'll borrow Gass's way of laying them out:

> Rilke: *Rose, terrestre pourtant, à nous autres* égale
>
> Poulin: Rose, certainly earthly and our equal
>
> Need: Rose, however earthly, like we others

Of course both Poulin and Need are deft with French and with translation in their own way, according to their own aesthetics and principles of translation. And yet, speaking for myself, I can't pick one. Arguments pile up on both sides, no matter how many lexicons or dictionaries you have at your disposal; the

thrill of a puzzle even led me to whip out my old *Collins*, but that search for the most accurate representation is contrary to the reason I am drawn to Rilke in the first place.

To what singular particular meaning do these lines cling? None. Rilke's verse does not come from a sense of belonging. It doesn't even presume that a sense of belonging is possible: it comes from an ache at never having had such a thing, a desire to subversively colonize emptiness, an urge to ask even the most seemingly well-seated reader if he or she truly can lay claim definitively to a sense of where he or she lives.

None of this is to say that the enterprise of translating is futile. Rather, it's to say that for the English language reader, the best-case scenario is a field of interpretation that refuses to acknowledge any single take as the authoritative one. *Les Roses* itself—this thousand-petaled ("mille paupières," from the seventh poem) half-open book full of possible interpretations, readings, and soundings—is an emblem of Valéry's *absence*. This, to me, is the most important thing that we can try to share with the English-language reader: a sense of living in what the sort of rootlessness ascribed to Rilke can mean and produce, the feeling of being without a sense of belonging to one particular language or one particular meaning, a brush with how it feels to hover in an indeterminate space between "certainly" and "however."

At the end of his introduction to *The Complete French Poems*, Poulin wonders:

> Perhaps soon a more adept poet-translator (who might also be a musician?) will be able to go beyond my occasional and approximate rhymes, my modified cadences, and reproduce Rilke's original French music far more accurately than I have done.

Poulin here is talking about how best to "reconstruct the original French music in English," but I want to broaden it here to think about sensation. Poulin's remarks are about sound, and thinking about sound in Rilke opens up the verse to thinking about other senses: while sound certainly looms large, it isn't Rilke's only concern.[9] As Gass would have it, Rilke's the conductor of a vast array of reimagined sensoriums:

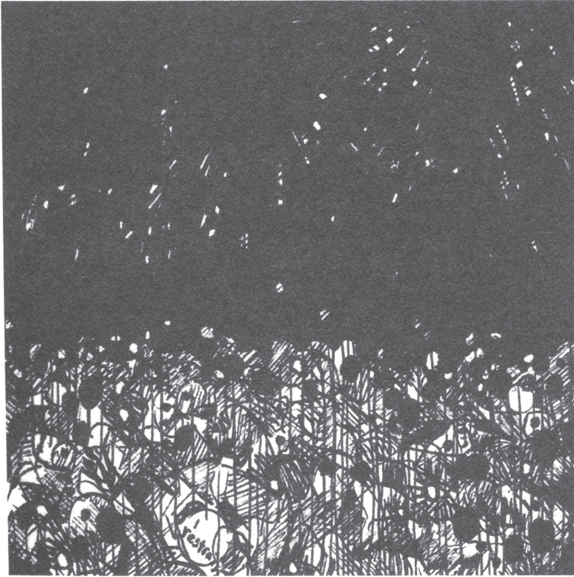
> Rilke wonders, wouldn't it be possible to translate taste into color, color into sound, sound into the run of an amorous finger along a thigh, for instance: "Is there any contour that one could not, in a sense, complete in this way and then experience it, as it makes itself felt, thus transformed, in another field of sense?"

One of my favorite things about *Roses: The Late French Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke* is that it takes this remark seriously. The volume translates and transforms Rilke's rose poems not only into the different senses conjured by French and by English, but also into different sensory fields.

As a material object, it is a beautiful book: if Rilke called the rose a "livre entrebàille" and a "livre-mage," Need and Johnson here make an argument that the equation works the other way too, that the *livre* is also a rose. Immediately after the front cover and immediately before the back are pages colored a deep red shade. The back inside flap of the book has lines from Rilke's diary in which he invents a new caress, one that involves "placing a rose gently on a closed eye until its coolness can no longer be felt." Inside, on heavy paper, the French poems are typeset in reddish-beige italics on the left with the translations on the corresponding right. A blank left page follows each pair of lyrics, and on the corresponding right pages are pieces of art by Johnson.[10]

Johnson's drawings are done in pen in black India ink; each one is the size of a Post-It note. By way of including "a kind of bridge between [her] art and the original writing"—an "acknowledgement of both their connection and their difference"—Johnson has handwritten a brief slice, a word or a phrase, from each translation in the corresponding drawing. Her drawings are also translations of a kind.

While the range of Johnson's pieces is mesmerizing, my favorites are the ones which strike both of the sets of tones that drive Rilke's rose poems: tendernesses and hardnesses, pleasures and displeasures, lightness and heaviness, littleness and massiveness. In that category the one I returned to the most frequently is the fifteenth, in which a soft, deep, black sky rises from a shimmering and yet inscrutably dark ground while flecks of light seem either to be rising into the sky, lingering there like stars, or falling to the ground, accumulating there like snow.



At the very bottom of the drawing, Johnson has placed a phrase from Need's corresponding translation: "I rested," which resounds in my ear as both the final words of a speaker falling into a gentle respite and words that connote a haunting.

When I looked at this picture my first thought was, "My god, it's full of stars"—a line known to some as a moment from the novel version of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and more recently given glorious new life by Tracy K. Smith in a 2011 poem of that title. "We saw to the edge of all there is— // So brutal and alive it seemed to comprehend us back," writes Smith. They're lines that readers would perhaps more easily associate with the magnificent *Elegies*, but Johnson's drawing drives home that they apply to *Roses*, too.

In her artist's statement Johnson writes of her journey with the flower itself, coming ultimately to this realization:

> My personal idea of a rose now holds a perfectly intertwined, beautifully uncomfortable combination of experiences and emotions—ones that are uneven and conflicting and do not go well together, but which life has made go together in a way I can't untangle.

We are once again on the subject of the ecstasy and the vitality—the "O"—of "pure contradiction." In *Les Roses*, and in *Roses: The Late French Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, sweetnesses and shocks touch one another on adjoining pages, and absence becomes a field much like the earth at Melissa's family's farm.

> *"Time, the very attar of the Rose, / Was running out."*
> *—James Merrill, The Changing Light at Sandover*

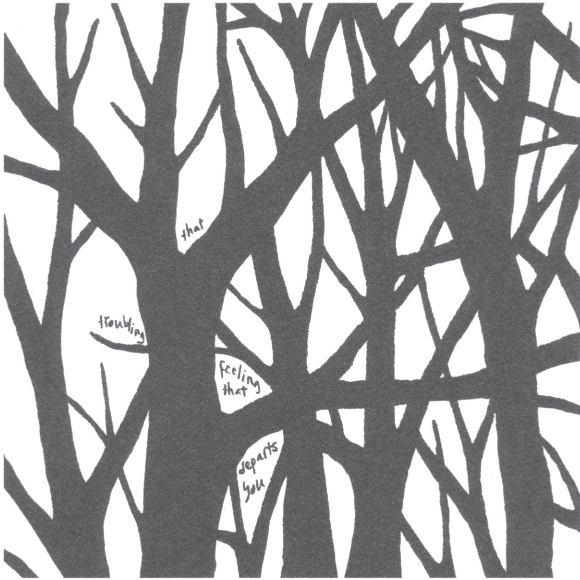
"One does not just *read* the man," writes Birkerts of Rilke: "one joins up with him at one point or another on his pilgrimage." I would add that we don't only join up with Rilke on *his* pilgrimage—we also join up with him on our own.

When my sister died, I was no stranger to mourning. I was also no stranger to the palette of contradictory feelings that come with a biography like mine: the resentment, fear, anger, and hatred for my childhood home combined with a yearning, warmth, sentimentality, and attachment for the things and people in it that I love and take solace in; the desire and decision to light out for the territories

alongside the need to always look back at the ones left in the underworld; the palpably thick faith in a tribe alongside the knowledge that kinship is built, nurtured, and cobbled-together rather than automatic or inherent amongst anyone or anything; the need to turn absence into something else. These feelings formed the foundation of my love for *Orpheus* and the *Elegies*.

One of the many things I was new to, though, is the feeling of being awash in a ferocious and powerful gentleness as well as a quiet and sure-footed raging grief. An unsettled longing brushing against cheeks and breasts, darkness engulfed by petals, a restful haunting, “douces” and “étonne.”

“Do I dare disturb the universe,” the plaintive and famous question of Eliot’s Prufrock, is a fine question. For me, though, I have often felt that Rilke’s verse makes me ask if I dare to let the universe disturb me. *Les Roses*, in this particular moment in Rilke’s pilgrimage and on mine, makes me feel as though the only possible answer is not only a simple *yes*, but the wild, ecstatic, soft, and tender voice of James Joyce’s Molly Bloom: “and yes I said yes I will yes.”


that
troubling
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departs you

Footnotes

[1] From Zagajewski's introduction to Edward Snow's *The Poetry of Rilke*, in which Zagajewski also calls Rilke "this rootless poet." See also: Robert Hass's introduction to Stephen Mitchell's *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke* ("of all poets, Rilke is the hardest to locate in a place . . . He had a lifelong sense of his own homelessness") and William Gass's *Reading Rilke: Reflections on the Problems of Translation* ("that rootless poet whom we've followed like a stray for so long we know the smell of his heels").

[2] In a 1907 letter to painter, poet, and musician Ernst Norlind—well before the late-in-life copious French output—Rilke writes, "And I am still from time to time compelled to write certain things in French to be able to bring them to form at all. But in so doing I have also come to the realization that one must not yield too much to this urge, rather one must keep applying one's powers to finding everything in one's own language." To a hindsight informed by his later work, this may appear a contradiction. To me, though, Rilke's definition of his "own language" seems instead to have grown throughout his career to later encompass "la française plage." In this 1907 letter itself he writes that "it should be our task to reach the ultimate in clarity in that which one has"—writing to Tsvetayeva in 1926, he seems to feel that French is a part of his interior.

[3] Rilke also at times mentioned his attraction to the French words "paume" (palm), "verger," and "offrande" (offering), all of which are found in varying levels of prominence in Rilke's French verse. I can't resist hearing how these four words could stitch together into a larger metaphor: in an outstretched palm, Rilke's offering is an orchard, which teems with an absence full of potentiality.

[4] From Mitchell's translation.

[5] Gass begins *Reading Rilke* with several pages about Rilke's relationship with the flower, moving backward from his famous epitaph: "Rose, O pure contradiction, desire / to be no one's sleep beneath so many lids." These pages are a must-read: he goes from the epitaph to the myth of Rilke's death-by-thorn, from an early letter in which Rilke describes a "new form of caress" he has "invented" ("placing a rose gently on a closed eye until its coolness can no longer be felt") to the poem "The Bowl of Roses," to roses and sex, to roses and love, to a late poem Rilke wrote about the inside of a rose, to roses and death, and even to a poem by Hölderlin—whose verse Zagajewski connects to Rilke's—titled "Mit Wilden Rosen." Gass also traces the flower through a variety of lyrics from Stein to Hölderlin.

[6] On the "empty and cold" place: in a letter to his wife Clara, Rilke imagines making an elaborate dinner which they'd eat with "roses all about us, tall ones, nodding on their stems, and reclining ones, gently raising their heads, and the kind that wander from hand to hand, like girls in the figure of a dance." "So I dreamed," he writes, lamenting that nevertheless "the cottage is empty and cold, and my apartment here too is empty and cold."

On the spring: Rilke in 1902 reports to painter, writer, and musician Oscar Zwintscher that "a few tall-stemmed roses are already sprouting, something one can't forget at all and feels as a most delightful promise."

On the beauty of their death: to Countess Mary Gneisenau in 1906, Rilke writes that just "as we somehow need the rose in its coming and its opening," it is also "expressly beautiful" when its "joyful and princely rhythm of its prime" has become "transiency, evanescence, a series of slowly descending tones": "how closely this to is bound up with our hearts . . . and we come to find them beautiful and to rejoice in them."

These are, of course, only a very small number of the mentions Rilke

makes of the rose in his letters. He describes countless landscapes and floral arrangements real and imaginary to Clara, to Lou Andreas-Salomé, to other artists and writers, to Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe—who first heard the *Duino Elegies*, as Prater describes, surrounded by the flower: "The occasion was unforgettable for Princess Marie. 'Secret, tiny low rooms with ancient furniture—flowers, flowers everywhere, among them the five-petalled, flamed-coloured rose'"—to Auguste Rodin, and many more.

[7] And as for cake, in poems, even that isn't uncomplicated. Take John Ashbery's "More Pleasant Adventures": "The first year was like icing. / Then the cake started to show through. / Which was fine, too, except you forget the direction you're taking."

[8] According to Gass, "every line which Rainer Maria Rilke wrote in early life is there in later life." I'm struck by the similarity between the letter in which Rilke invents a "new form of caress" involving a rose (see my fifth footnote) and the seventh poem in the *Roses* cycle. I'll cite here a snippet of Need's translation: "Resting, cool bright / rose, against my closed eyes— / one would say a thousand eyelids / were superimposed // against this hot one of mine."

[9] Birkerts: "With the very first lines [of *Sonnets to Orpheus*]—'A tree ascended there. Oh pure transcendence! / Oh Orpheus sings! Oh tall tree in the ear!'—Rilke announces the highest possible claim for poetry and song: the conversion of all that exists into sound."

[10] It's worth noting here that, as Need tells us in his introduction, the companion volume to *Les Roses*, titled *Les Fenêtres* (*Windows*), was even in its original form an illustrated collection. Its illustrations are the work of Rilke's last lover, the painter Baladine Klossowska.

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