



Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God

Rainer Maria Rilke , Anita Barrows (Translator) , Joanna Macy (Translator)

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At the beginning of this century, a young German poet returned from a journey to Russia, where he had immersed himself in the spirituality he discovered there. He "received" a series of poems about which he did not speak for a long time - he considered them sacred, and different from anything else he ever had done and ever would do again. This poet saw the coming darkness of the century, and saw the struggle we would have in our relationship to the divine. The poet was Rainer Maria Rilke, and these love poems to God make up his Book of Hours.

Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God Details

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From Reader Review Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God for online ebook

Zinta says

The task of a translator, I think, has always been unappreciated. It is a demanding one, a task that can never be done to the perfection it begs. Language is a living, breathing thing, and it holds within it an entire culture, and in that culture, an entire people, and within these people, an entire world. It is not possible to withdraw one such world and make it fit into the shape of another.

Yet if we are to even try to understand one another, the many of us on this earth and our ways, then translating the great works of any culture is a much needed task that some very brave soul must undertake. Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy are such brave souls, and the two friends are bonded by their deep love for the work of German poet (but born in Prague), Rainer Maria Rilke. While I know a very little of German, I cannot by any measure judge their success in translation. I have read Rilke in two languages, German being neither of them, and only from that experience can I say, cautiously, that I believe them to be as successful as any translators may hope to be. And it may be enough that a translator love a work so deeply and with such devotion that this in itself carries through the spirit of what is intended.

How can one not fall in love with Rilke? The poet transcends time, expressing what humankind has tried to express, surely, since self-awareness first blushed at its own face. In this particular collection, Rilke's poetry is a kind of love letter to God. As love letters do, his poems speak of longing, of devotion, of the desire to serve and please, of the fears of separation, of the joy of reunion. He wishes to present himself to God as he is, with open heart, in praise, one lonely being, perhaps, to another lonely being, both craving to love and be loved.

You, God, who live next door—

If at times, through the long night, I trouble you
with my urgent knocking—
this is why: I hear you breathe so seldom.
I know you're all alone in that room.
If you should be thirsty, there's no one
to get you a glass of water.
I wait listening, always. Just give me a sigh!
I'm right here.

As it happens, the wall between us
is very thin. Why couldn't a cry
from one of us
break it down? It would crumble
easily,

it would barely make a sound.

For Rilke, God is most intimate, most personal. He speaks to Him as if they stand side by side, and indeed they do. The need for company is mutual. Rilke's work is arguably a perfect blend of male and female sensibilities, with both the masculine in its demand and the feminine in its open heart. As Rilke was in his first years raised, oddly enough, as a daughter—his mother had longed for one, and in something weirdly like denial, dressed her long-locked boy as a girl in dresses and called him Rene—so in later years, his father

sent him to military school, to toughen him up and teach him a very male discipline. Rilke would find his own good mix. He fit neither of their plans, nor the conventional of a working society.

Poetry was his love for as long as memory, and in whatever context his life, it was the one steady rock. He could and would not do any other work, forever seeking sponsors and mentors so that he may devote himself fully to his art. When he fell in love for the first time, the woman he loved urged him to use the more masculine version of his name, Rainer. And so ever after, he did. But all of this seems like sideline matters, mere tangents, including the love itself, as he had numerous relationships, holding none steady, including a marriage that produced a child. Nothing else came first. Nothing. Only the word in verse.

When Rilke worked alongside sculptor, Auguste Rodin, he watched the sculptor's intensity and passion for his art, and was inspired. They were a match, if not in medium, then in devotion. This was how to live one's life as an artist. With a singular vision, an undistracted dedication. If Rodin created in stone, Rilke created in language, and so he sculpted verse, and in verse, his ongoing and lifelong prayer:

Only in our doing can we grasp you.
Only with our hands can we illumine you.
The mind is but a visitor:
it thinks us out of our world.

Each mind fabricates itself.
We sense its limits, for we have made them.
And just when we would flee them, you come
and make of yourself an offering.

I don't want to think a place for you.
Speak to me from everywhere.
Your Gospel can be comprehended
without looking for its source.

When I go toward you
it is with my whole life.

No doubt, God was listening and listens still. If most of us pray in stutters and whispers, Rilke prayed in lyrical poetry, from the heart to God's ear. Through his, the rest of us feel that much closer to the divine, as well.

Kitaplarvesozleri says

Ahh Rilke seni çok seviyorum!!!

Steven Godin says

Beautiful, spiritual, insightful poetry. I appreciate all aspects of his work, this one in particular though is one to be treasured. It's like binding words into serene works of art. Essential reading for those who seek a deeper understanding of Rilke's journey, as both man and poet.

I picked out the poem below, which I feel sums up Rilke's mind during this book.

What will you do, God, when I die?
When I, your pitcher, broken, lie?
When I, your drink, go stale or dry?
I am your garb, the trade you ply,
you lose your meaning, losing me.

Homeless without me, you will be
robbed of your welcome, warm and sweet.
I am your sandals: your tired feet
will wander bare for want of me.

Your mighty cloak will fall away.
Your glance that on my cheek was laid
and pillowed warm, will seek, dismayed,
the comforts that I offered once —
to lie, as sunset colors fade
in the cold lap of alien stones.

What will you do, God? I am afraid.

Dillon says

I first read Rilke's Book of Hours a number of years ago, and just recently picked it up again. I'm not a deeply spiritual person, and I'm far from religious, but the imagery and emotion in these poems resonated with me immediately. Rilke does not write of God or Christianity as we see them around us today, but rather about a more primitive, naturalist, personal, spiritual sense of the divine. Written as the 19th century bled into the 20th, Rilke speaks to the encroaching darkness of an increasingly modern world; he touches on our increasing disconnect from the natural world, our (still continuing) abandonment of those in need, and how easily we set aside a richness of being in exchange for luxuries. There is darkness in his writing -- a deep sorrow for a world losing its way -- but also joy, sensuality, and an inexorable yearning for a return to a more genuine state of being:

How surely gravity's law,
strong as an ocean current,
takes hold of even the smallest thing
and pulls it towards the heart of the world.

Each thing --
each stone, blossom, child --
is held in place.
Only we, in our arrogance,
push out beyond what we each belong to
for some empty freedom

If we surrendered to earth's intelligence
we could rise up rooted, like trees.

Instead we entangle ourselves
in knots of our own making
and struggle, lonely and confused.

So, like children, we begin again
to learn from the things,
because they are in God's heart;
they have never left him.

This is what the things can teach us:
to fall,
patiently to trust our heaviness.
Even a bird has to do that
before he can fly.

Sarah ~ says

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Neil Coulter says

I found this copy of the *Book of Hours* on a giveaway shelf several months ago, and I believe it's the best free book that has ever come to me. I would even say it's destiny that let me find this collection of amazing poems and reflections on God.

I'm not much interested in poetry. I often find it either gimmicky (bound by certain rules that make it seem artificial to me) or impenetrable (re: almost any poem that appears in the *New Yorker*). But Rilke's poems knocked me off my chair again and again (and I've read through this volume numerous times since first finding it).

I've rarely found any writing, poetry or prose, that so perfectly captures the feelings I have as I contemplate God and my relationship to him. As someone involved in the arts, I love that Rilke has an artist's perspective. Throughout the first of the three books in the collection, he considers the challenge of portraying God artistically but honestly.

We must not portray you in king's robes,
you drifting mist that brought forth the morning.

Once again from the old paintboxes

we take the same gold for scepter and crown
that has disguised you through the ages.

Piously we produce our images of you
till they stand around you like a thousand walls.
And when our hearts would simply open,
our fervent hands hide you. (I:4, p. 50)

This is the challenge for any artist committed to following Christ: portraying God without being distracted by the portrayal itself.

Near the end of Book 1, Rilke returns to that theme.

I want to utter you. I want to portray you
not with lapis or gold, but with colors made of apple bark.
There is no image I could invent
that your presence would not eclipse.

I want, then, simply
to say the names of things. (I:60, p. 89)

I also like how in Rilke's landscape, darkness is where God dwells and meets us. "But in the deep darkness is God" (I:50, p. 83). Bright daylight, "where light thins into nothing" (I:50, p. 83), can be a distraction, but throughout these poems darkness is where the truth is revealed and peace is possible.

Having spent some time earlier this year with Shusako Endo's *Silence*, and Makoto Fujimura's meditation on Endo, *Silence and Beauty*, I appreciated the recurring theme of God's silence in Rilke's poems.

Sometimes I pray: Please don't talk.
Let all your doing be by gesture only.
Go on writing in faces and stone
what your silence means. (I:44, p. 80)

He who will overcome you
is working in silence. (I:49, p. 82)

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night. (I:59, p. 88)

I am very fond of each of the three books in this volume. Book 1 contains many of my favorite poems of the collection, and Books 2 and 3 are astounding when read straight through, as one unbroken meditation. I don't think every follower of Jesus would love Rilke as much as I do, but for a certain type of Christian (me), Rilke is a godsend.

Other reviews of this edition point out the liberties that the translators, Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy, have taken in setting Rilke into English. I understand that, and I don't claim to "know Rilke" through having read this translation. I probably know Barrows and Macy as well as I do Rilke. But that's okay with me. The way they translated, while perhaps altering Rilke's original meaning, spoke to me in exactly the way I needed. Whatever it is that I've read here, it has lifted me up, and I will return to it again and again.

Jennifer Hughes says

I put this on my Christmas wish list, and then promptly ordered it for myself Christmas afternoon when I did not find it under the tree! :D Over the last month, I have been savoring this incredible book.

In "Book of Hours: Love Poems to God," Rilke explores our relationship to the divine in exquisite, must-read poetry. As I read, many of the poems resonated with me on a cellular level. Some feel sacred as scripture. This book is such a treasure.

The translators have been thorough and really transparent editors, with each poem's original (in German) appearing on the left with the translation on the right. A detailed explanation in the preface, a summary of Rilke's life story and what was happening as he wrote these poems, and end notes with comments on the individual poems makes this an excellent resource. I only wish I could read the originals in German to really enhance my understanding and appreciation.

In many poems, Rilke persists in seeking God even when he can't feel Him near:

I.2

I live my life in widening circles
that reach out across the world.
I may not complete this last one
but I give myself to it.

I circle around God, around the primordial tower
I've been circling for thousands of years
and I still don't know: am I a falcon,
a storm, or a great song?

I.25

I love you, gentlest of Ways,
who ripened us as we wrestled with you.

You, the great homesickness we could never shake off,
you the forest that always surrounded us,

you, the song we sang in every silence,
you dark net threading through us.

You began yourself so greatly
on that day when you began us--
and we have so ripened in your sunlight,
spreading far and firmly planted--
that now in all people, angels, madonnas,
you can decide: the work is done.

Let your hand rest on the rim of Heaven now
and mutely bear the darkness we bring over you.

As Rilke seeks the divine, he encounters fear and despair. This poem is a painful snapshot of a raw, visceral moment (which I first heard in connection with the feelings someone had going through cancer treatment, and it seemed so appropriate in that context):

I.23

I'm slipping. I'm slipping away
like sand

slipping through fingers. All
my cells

are open, and all
so thirsty. I ache and swell

in a hundred places, but mostly
in the middle of my heart.

I want to die. Leave me alone.
I feel I am almost there--

where the great terror
can dismember me.

And then a poem that seems to be from the perspective of God, gently responding:

I.19

I am, you anxious one.

Don't you sense me, ready to break
into being at your touch?
My murmurings surround you like shadowy wings.
Can't you see me standing before you
cloaked in stillness?
Hasn't my longing ripened in you from the beginning
as fruit ripens on a branch?

I am the dream you are dreaming.
When you want to awaken, I am that wanting.
I grow strong in the beauty you behold.
And with the silence of stars I enfold
your cities made by time.

To Rilke, God is in the dark and the light, in nature and the earth; simultaneously, perhaps, a real being as well as someone who is only real because mankind creates Him. The paradoxes are fascinating. I keep ruminating on them and some of Rilke's startling and refreshing images.

My review can't do this beautiful work justice. I highly recommend a study of Rilke's Book of Hours both to those who seek to "ripen" (as Rilke would say) their walk with God as well as those ambivalent about spirituality but who just love a beautiful poem. You'll be amply rewarded for your time spent reading.

Omar BaRass says

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Eadweard says

I live my life in widening circles
that reach out across the world
I may not complete this last one
but I give myself to it

I love the dark hours of my being.
My mind deepens into them.

There I can find, as in old letters,
the days of my life, already lived,

and held like a legend,
and understood.

I'm slipping, I'm slipping away
like sand

slipping through fingers. All
my cells

are open, and all
so thirsty. I ache and swell

in a hundred places, but mostly
in the middle of my heart

I want to die. Leave me alone.
I feel I am almost there-

where the great terror
can dismember me

My blood is alive with many voices
telling me I am made of longing.

Often when I imagine you
your wholeness cascades into many shapes
You run like a herd of luminous deer
and I am dark, a forest.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror
Just keep going. No feeling is final.

No one lives his life

Disguised since childhood,
haphazardly assembled
from voices and fears and little pleasures

we come of age as masks.
Our true face never speaks.

Somewhere there must be storehouses
where all these lives are laid away
like suits of armor or old carriages
or clothes hanging limply on the walls

Maybe all paths lead there,
to the depository of unlived things.

For we are only the rind and the leaf.

The great death, that each of us carries inside,
is the fruit.

Everything enfolds it.

Nahed.E says

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Miriam says

Du, Nachbar Gott, wenn ich dich manchesmal

You, God, who live next door—

*If at times, through the long night, I trouble you
with my urgent knocking—
this is why: I hear you breathe so seldom.
I know you're all alone in that room.
If you should be thirsty, there's no one
to get you a glass of water.
I wait listening, always. Just give me a sign!
I'm right here.*

*As it happens, the wall between us
is very thin. Why couldn't a cry*

*from one of us
break it down? It would crumble
easily,*

it would barely make a sound.

This is perhaps not the best translation, but it is accessible and the edition affordable

Stephen Roach says

This is one of those works that bears a seed of eternity within it. I keep coming back to these poems again and again and each time I am moved beyond myself. my perspective on what it means to relate to God and the world we live in widens over and again.

Caroline says

Whoa. *Whoa.*

I read a checked-out library copy of this book, but about halfway through I realized that I was going to need to own it. Still working on that. But thanks to Rilke, I finally understand the point of poetry. Don't get me wrong - I've appreciated poetry before, like the imagery it evoked or the cadence it gave or whatever. But THIS. Well, just refer to the first two words of the review.

I found this stuff profound. In almost every poem I found a stanza or thought that would just stop me in my tracks with an "aha!" moment or simply due the sheer beauty of the words. I think this is also the first time I've come upon subject matter that couldn't be adequately expressed *except* through poetry. Most love poems I've read I find to be rather trite, but these are anything but. The depth of feeling they express is simply incredible.

My first exposure to Rilke's poetry came from a church talk I heard a few years ago. The poem was titled "God Speaks to Each of Us," and after hearing it I thought about it for months afterward. It was this poem that led me to the *Book of Hours*. It also impressed upon me the difficulty of translating poems. The fact that all of Rilke's poems were originally written German meant there were many variations in English of a single poem in the German. As a result, I had to flip through a number of different editions of the *Book of Hours* with different translators before finding that the Barrows/Macy translation contained the version of the first Rilke poem I had heard years earlier. Their translation was the best that I found and seems to have been done with an immense amount of thought and care.

Two final thoughts. First, I loved how universally applicable these poems are. They are appropriate readers of any or no faith, a point that Macy and Barrows emphasize in their commentary. Second, I loved Rilke's focus on the idea of ripening. I've never thought of ripening in terms of anything other than fruit, but I think Rilke sees it as one of our reasons for being on earth. I like this idea. I want to ripen.

Zanna says

First read 2006

There is very little pre-modern poetry that I am able to read myself, (though I can often appreciate it being recited) and I am not sure whether it's Rilke's genius or Babette Deutsch's musical, mainly free verse translation that makes these poems so beautiful, so perfectly clear and direct, like a mountain spring rolling over your toes, like a smooth cool pebble dropped into your hand.

As an atheist I have to interrogate myself and work hard for a meaningful interpretation when I read Rilke, but his god is so interesting that sometimes I'm content to smile and leave him to it. Even the unbeliever can find some stimulating conversation to have with these poems, if not comfort and sweetness.

What will you do God, when I die?
When I, your pitcher, broken, lie?
When I, your drink, go stale or dry?
I am your garb, the trade you ply,
you lose your meaning, losing me.

Homeless without me, you will be
robbed of your welcome, warm and sweet.
I am your sandals: your tired feet
will wander bare for want of me.

Your mighty cloak will fall away.
Your glance that on my cheek was laid
and pillowed warm, will seek, dismayed,
the comfort that I offered once -
to lie, as sunset colours fade
in the cold lap of alien stones.

What will you do, God? I am afraid.

In her introductions Deutsch writes (beautifully) about Rilke's god as created by art "The wine not yet ripened", but here the poet addresses god in intimate love as, it seems to me, both parent and child.

All will grow great and powerful again:
the seas be wrinkled and the land be plain,
the trees gigantic and the walls be low;
and in the valleys, strong and multiform,
a race of herdsfolk and of farmers grow.

No churches to encircle God as though
he were a fugitive, and then bewail him
as if he were a captured wounded creature -
all houses will prove friendly, there will be
a sense of boundless sacrifice prevailing
in dealings between men, in you, in me.

No waiting the beyond, no peering toward it,

but longing to degrade not even death;
we shall learn earthliness, and serve its ends,
to feel its hands about us like a friend's.

Without agreeing with him, I have sympathy for Nietzsche's sneer at Christian morality. Love your neighbour and give away your wealth is simply not enough to live by, which is why the 'great' Catholic theologians like Aquinas had to shore it up with Aristotle and other philosophers of the greco-roman tradition. Rilke takes a different approach, placing responsibility on the individual to create a world of gentleness and respect for nature through love. Hmm. Well it works as poetry, it works as an appeal, it feels nice.

They will say "mine" as one will sometimes call
the prince his friend in speech with villagers,
the prince being very great - and far away.
They call strange walls "mine," knowing not at all
who is the master of the house indeed.
They still say "mine", and claim possession, though
each thing, as they approach, withdraws and closes;
a silly charlatan perhaps thus poses
as owner of the lightning and the sun.
And so they say: my life, my wife, my child,
my dog, well knowing all that they have styled
their own: life, wife, child, dog, remain
shapes foreign and unknown,
that blindly groping they must stumble on.
This truth, be sure, only the great discern,
who long for eyes. The others will not learn
that in the beggary of their wandering
they cannot claim a bond with any thing,
but, driven from possessions they have prized,
not by their own belongings recognized,
they can OWN wives no more than they own flowers,
whose life is alien and apart from ours.

This apartness of other beings, especially animals, is picked up by DH Lawrence, for example in his poem Fish. When I read Lawrence's poem in this anthology I thought I had read in Rilke a wonderful poem about animals' experience of the world in this little collection, but I was confused; the poem was in The Thunder Mutters. It's much richer and chewier than the sweet little poems here, so I know there's a lot more Rilke for me. That's good, because his words make the world lovelier. They weigh in the balance against despair.

Meredith says

My favorite poem of Rilke's is found in this book. I first read it in the bathroom of the Video Saloon where it had been written with sharpie in the first stall.

"I am praying again, Awesome One"
(*Ich bete wieder, du Elauchter*)

You hear me again, as words
from the depths of me
rush toward you in the wind.

I've been scattered in pieces,
torn by conflict,
mocked by laughter,
washed down in drink.

In alleyways I sweep myself up
out of garbage and broken glass.
With my half-mouth I stammer you,
who are eternal in your symmetry.
I lift to you my half-hands
in wordless beseeching, that I may find again
the eyes with which I once beheld you.

I am a house gutted by fire
where only the guilty sometimes sleep
before the punishment that devours them
hounds them out in the open.

I am a city by the sea
sinking into a toxic tide.
I am strange to myself, as though someone unknown
had poisoned my mother as she carried me.

It's here in all the pieces of my shame
that now I find myself again.
I yearn to belong to something, to be contained
in an all-embracing mind that sees me
as a single thing.
I yearn to be held
in the great hands of your heart—
oh let them take me now.
Into them I place these fragments, my life,
and you, God—spend them however you want.

Tia says

I came upon an old, now out-of-print edition of this (with a stained glass window on the cover...) in a library years ago, and almost wept among the stacks. I do not know what I feel about God...I subscribe to no formal religion at present, though I find myself uttering prayers now and again, or earnestly thanking *something* under my breath, so perhaps my half-belief is what causes these words to move me so, still. But perhaps it is the profound HUMANITY to be found in Rilke's lines, alongside (and sometimes, mixed together with) the divine.

Robert Case says

This book was savored, digested a few poems at a time last summer, while on a 6-week bicycling tour of the western US. One of the trip's many purposes was to unplug from the pace of city living, to better reassess my own path and priorities. The bicycle and this book were both vehicles for that practice. Writing over one hundred years ago, Rilke's poems describe and promote a reciprocal relationship with the Divine. They are full of possibilities and challenges, making the book an ideal companion for an interested reader in the midst of a long journey.

rahul says

How surely gravity's law,
strong as an ocean current,
takes hold of even the strongest thing
and pulls it toward the heart of the world.

Each thing-
each stone, blossom, child –
is held in place.
Only we, in our arrogance,
push out beyond what we belong to
for some empty freedom.

If we surrendered
to earth's intelligence
we could rise up rooted, like trees.

Instead we entangle ourselves
in knots of our own making
and struggle, lonely and confused.

So, like children, we begin again
to learn from the things,
because they are in God's heart;
they have never left him.

This is what the things teach us:
to fall,
patiently trusting our heaviness.
Even a bird has to do that
before he can fly.

-Rainer Maria Rilke

Jennifer Locke says

Read this book several years ago and decided that I had to own it, mainly for this poem:

I live my life in widening circles
that reach out across the world.
I may not complete this last one
but I give myself to it.

I circle around God, around the primordial tower.
I've been circling for thousands of years
and I still don't know: am I a falcon, a storm,
or a great song?

????? says

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