

Sonnets to Orpheus

Rainer Maria Rilke

Christiane Marks, Translator

Open Letter (Dec 1, 2019)

Hardcover \$15.95 (111pp)

978-1-948830-06-5

That the greatest poets receive sudden flashes of inspiration is demoralizing to mere mortals. Already so rich in talent, such poets don't need—or deserve—the metaphorical lightning strike to the ink-filled rods that they wield to create their poetical magic. Yet in describing how his *Sonnets to Orpheus* came to be, the incomparable Rainer Maria Rilke said that the fifty-five sonnets arrived as “an inner dictation, completely spontaneous,” set down in just a couple of days in 1923 when he was in his forties. But then, Rilke was an old hat at inspiration. Indeed, he prepared for it by sheltering in complete solitude—patiently waiting.

*Breathing—you invisible poem!
Outer space, continually
exchanged for my own pure being. Counterweight,
site of my rhythmical realization.*

In the introduction to her splendid new translation, Christiane Marks explains that “Preserving this fresh, spoken quality” was vitally important to her, because it reflects the “poems’ completely unanticipated, surprise arrival.” She also tells us that Rilke had death and love on his mind when he set about creating the *Sonnets*. Death, because the horrors of WWI had left him distraught until he came to realize that death was “truly just life in another, non-physical state,” and that “the barriers between the states of life and death should be removed.” Love, she writes, permeates the *Sonnets* “in the form of praise and joyful affirmation of everything they touch—gardens, dancers, flowers, flavors, unicorns, the sense of hearing—whatever it might be.”

That she is the only Rilke translator to share his German tongue, in addition to her many decades of research into Rilke's genius, proves to be the decisive factor in Marks's ability to bring freshness to these lines that are familiar to so many.

MATT SUTHERLAND (January / February 2020)

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