

**John Torrance**

**Sketches from Two Winter Evenings**

*by R. M. Rilke*

Dedicated to Anton Kippenberg in  
friendship, 22 May 1924<sup>1</sup>

*Prelude*

Why do I suddenly see the stone-rimmed  
spring in the park, with its roof of elms?  
And in the antiquated basin  
the water, like a painted background?

That was what drew me. Perhaps I foresaw  
possibilities there, in its peaceful oval.  
Or was it the hope of a kashmir shawl  
lost in the mirror-image of leaves?

Who knows, now youth no more deceives?  
How many attempts to grasp the void  
has limpid water wonderfully chastened,  
yet still it shines up at me, and deepens the dream.

*I*

I was too young at the time. Yet nothing's kept  
its beauty like that afternoon, Suddenly  
they wanted to dance, quickly rolled up the old carpet.  
(What a shimmer still lies over all of this!)

And then she danced. One had eyes only for her.  
Yet even so she was often lost to sight  
because her fragrance had become a world  
in which we were all submerged. I was too young.

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<sup>1</sup> Anton Kippenberg was Rilke's publisher at Insel Verlag, a generous patron and friend.

But when was I ever to be grownup enough  
to keep my head amidst such perfume?  
Or able to drop like a stone, unmoved, from such  
an indescribable encounter?

No, it still remains beautiful! Her scent  
of flowers in the garden-room, that day —  
how intact it stays, and never contravened!  
How *mine* its inexhaustible riches.

—

All I possess is this: a possibility  
that bliss flew over us — No, not that:  
*impossibility*, rather; an intimation  
that in that summer, in that garden-room  
the music of those unforgotten moments  
seduced us blamelessly, in innocence.

How do I think of you, now I'm grown up,?  
No longer with the confusion of the child,  
but almost as a god would, full of joy.  
If hours like that are not just transitory  
what structures may not life build up in us  
out of scents and mere appearances?

—

Everything is dear to me, your freckles  
and the clasp which fastened up your sleeve;  
oh how incredible, and how unfaded  
is that sweetness still, where nothing's spoiled!

I was swaying as I stood, enraptured  
by my own heart's overflow,  
a flower — a convolvulus — half-shredded  
between my childish fingers.

Oh how will life exceed, ever again,  
what it offered then, already in bloom  
and yet, by its withholding, dangled there  
before me, as if from inside garden walls?

—

No, I'll never forget you,  
                    whatever I become,  
lovely early-day light,  
                    firstborn of Earth.

Everything that you promised  
                    Earth has contained,  
since you broke my heart open  
                    without any pain.

First and most fleeting figure  
                    I was aware of:  
now that I've learnt what strength is  
                    I praise what's tender.

—

If I write about fruit  
it's perhaps because of you bending  
over the strawberries;  
and if flowers don't wither in me,  
could it be because happiness once  
made you pick one?

I know how you ran  
until, suddenly, breathless,  
you turned back towards me, waiting.  
I sat by your side as you slept,  
and your left hand  
lay like a rose.

—

Did I ever escape your early dominance?  
Are you not now, on every path,  
always ahead, always above me still?  
Shall we ever be equal?

You were always just right, so not even fashion  
could ever put me off your clothes.  
As your flight from me also belongs to me . . .  
Will it fade away as I die?

Or should I throw your influence back  
upon nature, as a way of denying  
I succumbed to your spell? And the long thrill  
of following your trail?

—

For this too is possible: saying No,  
and proudly sticking with the boys;  
not to exaggerate to oneself  
the reflected image of a girl.

Can the later company of youths  
compare with so gentle a power?  
For even friends may hold things in reserve,  
completely inaccessible.

Say nothing, and take the rough with the smooth.  
Many who meet you in quiet places  
will bless you, beyond your expectation.  
Yes, they will bless you.

II

How did it happen? To succeed in loving,  
and at school too, where nothing succeeded!  
Infinite things stay undescribed  
between a rising and setting sun.

It came to fruition in secret, but in one  
whose mouth was not yet ripe for it;  
but the heart too kept itself well clear  
throughout a year of nameless love.

What were school, detentions, mealtimes, games,  
what was waking, what was sleeping?  
Already in suddenly ordered octaves  
the sounds of all the future came together.

—

Oh, there was so much then to be enjoyed,  
and the heart gained the upper hand —  
while life itself was standing undecided  
all around those boyish games.

At that time it was given in excess,  
and then indeed his fortune was decided;  
life, which later on would take his measure,  
reached out now to take hold of him.

For while a female partner was withheld,  
a god felt wholly present in the child,  
and so was founded on the boy's defeat  
the eventual survival of the man.

