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Until Our Souls Are Stars

Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé

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THE BRIGHT YEARS

1.

MUNICH, 13 MAY 1897

The cry for equality rang out through the streets of Europe. Millions of people took to the streets to demand women's suffrage. Only a select few women were afforded the opportunity to attend university. During this time of upheaval, Louise von Salomé, the daughter of a Russian general and a German mother, was studying philosophy, art history, and theology in Zurich. She published her first texts under a male nom de plume, because she felt she had no chance of getting published as a woman. Later on, her works were published under her own name, and she became well-known in literary circles.

Certainly she was better known than the self-absorbed young poet who appeared in front of her for the first time at a reading. He had intense eyes, a thin neck, and slender

shoulders. There is something unfinished-looking about men who have no curve to the back of their head, thought Lou. His suit was threadbare, but perfectly ironed.

"What an impression he made on me!"

René Maria Rilke had read Lou's novel *Ruth*, which had only been published after a series of setbacks and humiliations.

"The girl in your book, the one who steals the heart of her teacher – in the unfolding of this girl's destiny, I could palpably feel a growing sense of disappointment and impending doom."

It amused Lou to hear him speak in such present terms about a work that she had long since put behind her.

"Was it really just disappointment you associated with this girl, not hope as well?"

With the young Rilke, Lou saw an inversion of the student-teacher relationship in her novel. While she was pushing forty, he was barely in his twenties. Would he make better use of the years that she had needed to gain her recognition, would he climb up or go down?

"Are you familiar with *Jesus der Jude*?", asked Lou.

"Am I familiar with your essay?" laughed Rilke. "*Jesus der Jude* is the very reason I'm here! I simply had to meet you! Do you really believe that we can lose our connection with God?"

She was silent for a moment. "Is that how you read my text?"

"How else could I have interpreted it?" he cried, so loudly that people in the salon turned around. "You claimed that religion is not enduring, that just like anything else, it is subject to transience, that religion emerges, its meaning changes, it undergoes transformations."

Lou set down the cup she had been holding in front of her as a barrier against this young man, who seemed to have no feeling for personal space. “Well now, have you lost contact with God, Mr. Rilke?”

“On the contrary.” He too set down his cup with a clink. “At the moment, I am getting closer to God with all my senses. I am calling my current work *Visions of Christ*. Which is why your treatise, the incredible force with which you express your conviction, is so invaluable to me.”

She looked at him with bewilderment and gestured toward the terrace. “It is such a beautiful day today. Wouldn’t it be better to discuss God, and everything to do with him, outside?”

“Where we’re closer to him!” Rilke followed Lou onto the terrace.

MUNICH, 29 MAY 1897

Rilke put on the white gloves that he always wore when he had to touch things that could have been handled by others. “I have so much to tell you.”

“You have already said enough, Rilke. And you’ve written even more.” Lou was looking for her seat in the eighth row.

“We weren’t able to speak openly in the company of others.” He was walking along beside her. “And yesterday, at the café, we were only able to discuss trivial matters.”

“And at the theatre, we will mainly be listening.”

Since they had arrived only moments before the beginning of the show, all the patrons in the eighth row were forced to stand up. While Lou apologised, Rilke just squeezed past them.

“Yesterday, at the lemonade stand, you thought you were not being observed, but I noticed you glancing at me. There was more than fondness in your look, I thought.”

“Is that so?” She folded down the seat.

“I got the impression that you are fond of me. Am I mistaken?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“Then please, be honest with me: Do you still feel that way about me?”

“How could things have changed from one day to the next?”

He touched her arm with his gloved hand. “Then I shall be so bold as to make you a proposal. Shall we go for a drive together tomorrow?”

Louise lowered her programme. “You are already thinking of tomorrow, when we are about to watch the story of a poet?”

“Cyrano de Bergerac, a poet?” A dismissive gesture. “I’ve read the piece. It might pass in the original French, but the German rhymes… awful, ragged verses!”

“Do not diminish my enjoyment with your disdain. I want to form my own opinion.”

“To sit next to you all evening long and witness the romance of another man, that’s…”

“Instructive. For the two of us.”

The hall went dark. She asked him to be silent.

Three hours later, they took a stroll together down Maximilianstrasse. “You were crying, Rilke.”

His hand was resting on her elbow. “I tried to suppress it. As I had feared, the verses were pompous and perfumed.”

“And yet you were crying.”

“I was moved by the sacrifice that Cyrano makes by keeping his true love a secret for his entire life. But in the very moment that Roxane recognises him, as soon as she reveals herself to him, that’s when…”

“Cyrano dies.” They were nearing the Residential Palace. “I thought it was handled elegantly.”

“Did it impress you?”

“Elegance does not impress me.” She stood still. “You should stop, Rilke.”

“Stop what?”

“Letters, poems, flowers – every day. We are not living in Cyrano’s times.”

“Do you find me elegant as well? Are my poems bad? Are they pompous?”

“Not pompous, more like…” Her steps slowed. “More nebulous. There must be almost a hundred of them by now.”

He abruptly let go of her arm. “Do I bore you? Or is it because of your husband?”

A few pensive steps. “As much as it pleases me to see your handwriting in the mail, it really is exhausting to be admired quite so intensely.” She was expecting him to protest, to feel insulted, even, but his answer surprised her.

“I understand that very well, Lou.”

“Really?”

“I’ve written hundreds of pages of letters to you in my head, of which I have only sent you the worthiest. Yet even as I write them, a terrible fear rouses within me.”

“Of what?” asked Lou as they reached the edge of Odeonsplatz.

“Of love, Lou. I do not know why I have to love so intensely, so ecstatically, since I am also so afraid of it. I don’t want you to get the wrong idea, my love is thoroughly positive in nature. When I love, I have energy, I am productive, I make new discoveries and make progress in my daily life.”

“Does this mean that for you, love is an end in itself? That you love to make yourself feel better?”

“I understand your criticism and do not wish to dismiss it. However, my problem is not love, but being loved. It weighs heavily upon my chest.”

“You love, but at the same time, you fear that your love will be requited?” She examined him with a new sense of unfamiliarity.

“Allow me to compare my condition to a metaphorical ebb and flow: although my love flows out like a great tide, the ebb inevitably returns, sometimes after only weeks. Ebb is only another word for the urgent need withdraw within myself. Anybody who loves is limited. In my experience, love is always coupled with expectations. It is in this that the impossibility of love lies.”

He interrupted himself: “But what am I doing? By confessing my love to you, I am also warning you to stay away from me! That’s madness.”

“It’s not madness. What did you call it? Impossibility.”

“Is it impossible for you to love me?”

They had reached the corner of Ludwigstrasse and Adalbertstrasse. She gave him her hand. “This is where we part ways, dear Rilke.”

2.

MUNICH, 10 JUNE 1897

Esteemed Lou, very well, we shall not call it love, if you so desire. Agreed! Why should we give a name to that which needs no name? But if not love, then let us at least call it inspiration. Could you, esteemed Lou, you who have already produced a powerful oeuvre of your own, find it in yourself to be my muse? For incomplete as I may be, I still feel greatness, purity, and I sense that it would only take an impulse from you, yes, from you, for this inner world to mature. A sunflower seed is an inconspicuous black speck. If one gets it to sprout, the flower that reminds us above all others of the meaning of life will emerge from it. Though the unfulfilled nature of our most recent encounters have sometimes left me heavy-hearted, each of them still inspired me to create a work that I no longer had to dedicate to an imaginary love, but to you! This is the source of your seductiveness, Lou: I look at you and see a rouser. Rouse me, Lou Andreas-Salomé! Set me free within myself, liberate me from so many things that childhood and a strict youth have buried inside me.

You’ve never said so much, but you have made me aware that when it comes to the work I have produced so far, I may well remain an inferior poet. I don’t deny it. The poems that I’ve written for you are proof enough. May I present them to you in a collection, so that we can decide together what shall be done with them?

Where are you, Lou, where will you spend the coming weeks and months?

MUNICH, 13 JUNE 1897

Dearest Rilke,

Happily, I have found accommodation in Upper Bavaria for my friend Frieda von Bulow, fresh from her travels through Africa. It is located in the district of Tölz, it is quite modest, indeed, to be entirely honest, it is more simple than modest. Bavaria is expensive, and it's all Frieda can afford. I will accompany her there, we shall head there tomorrow. If you, my dearest Rilke, would like to visit us and are not too demanding when it comes to gaining some summer air, you are most welcome to join us. Then we can decide what to do with your early work. You may send your reply to the following address...

Behind a veil of clouds and drizzle, June concealed the fact that it was indeed a summer month. Rilke found this particularly unpleasant, since each day he stepped out of the house with the assumption that it was not really raining, only to end up getting wet.

Wolfratshausen was sprawled over the valleys of the Isar and Loisach rivers, the latter of which flowed into the larger one at Isarspitz. Travelling from Munich, the railroad twisted and turned between Sendling, Pullach, and Baierbrunn, briefly traversing the edges of the Grünwald forest. Rilke hoped the weather would improve: his allergies were always more severe in humid conditions than in dry weather. Although it was pollen season, he had not for a second considered turning down Lou's invitation. Although her letter was written in a sober tone, he had sensed that she wanted to have him by her side. The presence of her friend Frieda would give their stay together a mantle of decorum. No one could suspect any immoral intentions behind Rilke's visit, not even Lou's husband, who preferred to stay in Berlin during the summer.

In his own letter, Rilke had asked Lou to be his inspiration, to rouse him. Yet as he rode the train through the rainy landscape of Upper Bavaria, he felt himself transforming once

again from a poet in search of assistance into a longing lover. His giddy anticipation would have been even greater if his hay fever hadn't reminded him that there was hardly anything more pathetic than a snivelling, bleary-eyed seducer.

When he had reached his destination, shivering after coach ride from the train station, he was dismayed to discover that the women felt no need to heat up their little hut. Why was the oven still cold, why were Lou and Frieda sitting on the porch in light clothes as though it were the middle of the summer? Did they not feel the ice-cold rain that was turning the hut into an inhospitable place? As they introduced themselves, Rilke kept his overcoat on. He also did not hang his hat on the nail by the door because he was freezing.

As Lou showed him the house, he began to question the whole trip. It was a miserable little shack, the stable was used to store corn, there was hay on the threshing floor, which hung so low over the main room that he had to duck his head, and the *salle de bain*s was located outside. In order to take care of any such business, he would be required to walk all the way to the edge of the wood, in full view of the main house, which he found outrageous.

Rilke's room was on the upper floor. The bed exuded an uncomfortable sense of chastity.

"I hope you'll manage." Lou placed a jug of water by the washbasin.

"Thank you. The nature is certainly charming." Had she caught his biting undertone?

"The weather is not likely to improve soon." She flung the shutters open and affixed them.

"Don't you ever fire up the oven?"

"Only for cooking. Frieda went and got some onions and eggs."

"I can't eat onions. My stomach…"

Lou was about to go, but he cut her off. “While your friend is cooking, perhaps we have the chance to discuss my poems?”

“Why, you’ve only just arrived,” she retorted. “Today we were planning to eat and then go for a walk up to the mountain pastures. The days are so wonderfully long at the moment.”

“But it’s raining.”

“Oh, my friend, that’s not rain.”

“What is it then?”

“Elevated humidity.” She walked off with a smile.

A few seconds later, left to his own devices, Rilke noticed the harbingers of doom. He crinkled his nose, sniffed, felt the first tear in his eye and a merciless scratching in his throat: there must have been some old hay stored in his immediate vicinity. He flung the door open. It was true, Lou had placed him right next to the threshing floor. Only a thin wooden wall separated him and his nose from a mountain of dusty hay. Rilke sneezed like a trumpet; he would not be able to spend a single minute in this room. He would rather head straight back home. He hurried down the stairs and confronted the hosts with his catastrophe. They were drinking lemonade and seemed completely unmoved, as though there were no cause for immediate action.

“My nose itches a little too,” replied Frieda von Bülow. “You get used to it. Would you like to sit down with us? I was just telling Lou about French Equatorial Africa.”

“Equatorial…?” Rilke gave it one last try: “Lou, may I speak with you for a moment?”

“In a bit. I’ve just sat down. Besides, I don’t keep any secrets from Frieda.”

Defeated by the situation, he slumped onto the rustic wooden chair. The rain grew denser, heavier, more inescapable.

The next day, Lou's friend travelled to Salzburg, where she hoped to convince a publisher to print her account of Africa. As though Frieda von Bülow had been the personification of Rilke's allergies, they evaporated that very same afternoon. He felt lighter, more at ease.

He hoped that his conversations with Lou would become more relaxed as he became less anxious, but ever since her friend had left, Lou seemed increasingly restless. She didn't quite seem to know what to do with this odd young man.

The collected manuscript he handed her consisted of a folder with more than a hundred loose sheets. Lou hesitated to open it.

"What a task it must've been to transcribe all these poems!"

"And not just once," he replied cheerfully. "I made some mistakes here and there and had to start over. Or sometimes I spilled some ink."

She opened the cover. "From the edge of the day—" Her gaze flitted over the lines. "Your first letter to me."

"How excited I was when I composed it, when I stamped it, and at that sacred moment, as I handed the letter to the postman."

She flipped through the pages and read the beginning of the second sheet.

"The rose here, the dark one…"

"What, don't you want to read *From the Edge of the Day* to me?" he asked, surprised.

"I already know it."

“I should like to hear it from your mouth.” He leant back in his armchair, making himself comfortable. “Please, it would make me happy.”

Shaking her head, she sat there with the folder in her lap.

“If I were to read you each one of your poems we would be sitting here until November.”

He gave a hearty laugh.

“I can’t do that, Rilke. It would feel like some form of adulation.”

“Adulation of whom?”

“The way you have described me… no, glorified me, you expect me to then read that out loud as well?”

“I didn’t seek to glorify you, but to elevate you. Shall I read it to you?” He bent towards her.

“Please don’t.” She pulled the folder away from him.

He was silent for a moment, offended.

“Do forgive me, Rilke.”

He crossed his arms. “In that case, I really don’t know why we should dedicate poems to one another in the first place. Very well, my readers will have to be the ones to judge the work then.”

“Readers…?”

“I intend on having them published.”

“Rilke!” Lou sprang up. The folder slipped, the pages sailed to the floor.

“What’s the matter?”

“Under no circumstances may you have these printed.”

“Why not?”

“You said it yourself: these poems are not addressed to some imaginary lover, but to me! They are not the poetic flowers of a yearning spirit. Every single one is about me.”

“Not once do I mention you by name.”

“Do you not know how small Munich’s literary world is? Everyone would speculate that what you write about so elegantly in your poems has a counterpart in reality.”

“Elegant? This is the second time you have used that word in relation to my work.”

“I meant that in the sense of…”

He interrupted her. “Is it impossible for you to accept the purity of my admiration, my sacred entrancement? There is no lascivious agenda hidden behind my words.”

“No agenda? Can you say that out loud without blushing?”

“A hundred times yes!”

Attempting to keep her composure, Lou smoothed out her summer dress. “Rilke, you asked me for this meeting so that we could go over your work together.”

“There is nothing to rework.” He too stood up. “It is all fine just the way it is. You invited me to keep you company during your summer holidays.”

“But only after you requested to see me!”

“So you do not want me here?” He stared at her.

“So far, your stay here has seemed to be pure torture to you.”

“Well, the cold and the humidity, perhaps. But that has changed since Frieda von Bülow left.”

“Is it possible that you came to Wolfratshausen only because you were looking for the opportunity to…?”

“No! No! No!” he interrupted and grabbed her by the shoulders. “There is no black and white between us. Because you inspire me, you are at once my muse and the object of my love. By spending this time together in the countryside, our two auras intersect, rippling each other like waves on the surface of the water. Although our bodies are separate, they react to each other, repelling and attracting one another. You feel it, you sense it, but you are resisting it. And yet – we are alone in a hut, far away from civilisation. The day is sinking, darkness is enveloping us…”

“And so you think might…?”

“And you don’t? You don’t, Lou?”

“Rilke –”

“Beloved –”

They stood side by side before the fire, in the middle of the night. Both were wearing overcoats, underneath they were scantily dressed. Lou in a mid-length nightshirt, heavy boots on her feet, Rilke in his underwear, with loafers on. For the ritual they had just completed in bed, there was no need to get dressed.

“Still –” she had sighed in the darkness.

“Yes?”

“Still, despite what happened… precisely because it happened, these poems can never reach the public.”

He had said nothing in response. “If you say so,” he ultimately replied.

She had sat up above him, her hair falling on his chest. “Unfortunately, you can’t have both, my esteemed friend: my love and the renown for your poems. Besides…”

“Yes?”

Lou fell onto her back. “I’m convinced that inside of you, something deeper is preparing to push to the surface.”

“What do you mean by that?”

She was silent.

Rilke pulled the candle closer and looked her in the face.

“Does that mean...? Do you think they’re no good?”

She remained silent for a moment too long.

“You think they’re no good!” he cried into the night. “You think they’re trite? Is that what you think?”

Lou propped herself up on her elbows. “You have a special voice in you, a gift for expanding the meaning of words that I have never witnessed in anyone else. But precisely because juggling words comes so easily to you, you simply toss them in the air and watch, laughing, as they fall, and voilà, another poem has come into being.”

“You’re wrong.”

“I know.”

He pulled her into his arms. “You’re right.”

“I know.”

“All I want is to give a name to the creations inside me and to thus, to capture life as I experience it. This alone fills up my days: giving meaning to syllables and letters. This is my great passion. Apart from my passion for love.”

She grinned. “Are you going to tell me about the ebb and flow again?”

“Even love is mostly just an idea. But sometimes –” He kissed her. “Sometimes reality is even more beautiful.”

They made love, truly and honestly, devotedly and quietly, they relaxed. Then, Rilke stood up.

“What are you doing?”

“I want to go outside.”

“Ah yes, our little outhouse…” She sighed. “Why does it have to be so far away?”

“That’s not why I want to be in the open air. Get up, help me.”

“Why? It’s freezing.”

“We’ll make ourselves cosy.”

Behind the house, he lit a fire. Before long, the logs of birch and pine wood were sending their flames into the black sky.

“We don’t have to do this,” said Lou, holding Rilke’s folder of poems in her hands.

“All or nothing.”

“But I like them.”

“You may well like them, but what matters is your opinion as an artist. Which you have already revealed.”

“All one hundred poems, Rilke – all that work…”

“And if there were a thousand, it would be the same thing. Come now, let’s go,” he urged her.

Lou tossed the first sheet into the flames. A gush of fire lifted the paper up before it turned to ash within seconds. One by one, other pages followed. Lou cast one last glance at each poem.

“Quiet sobbing –” she read. “Trees of life –” With one sheet, she took a longer pause. “Rose, you enthroned one: to those in antiquity you were a cup of simple rim... What is it with you and roses?” she asked, while the page went up in flames.

After she had emptied half of the folder and Rilke had burned one or two poems himself, Lou paused before handing him one of the pages.

“Not this one.”

“All or nothing. Did Hannibal spare a single ship in the port of Carthage? No, he burned them all.” He stretched out his hand.

“This one is so wonderful. You should publish it, in a different series.”

Surprised by her words, he read it one more time.

“Extinguish my eyes, I’ll go on seeing you; Seal my ears, I’ll go on hearing you; And without feet I can make my way to you…”

He handed her the page. “Yes,” he said. “It’s good.”

The birch wood crackled, the sparks devoured their way into the night sky.

3.

THREE YEARS LATER, RUSSIA, MAY 1900

Tolstoy's grandfather, Prince Nikolai Volkonsky, had purchased the estate of Yasnaya Polyana in the 18th century. It lay seventeen versts away from the city of Tula in the south of Russia. An avenue lined with birch trees led to the main building, and on this road the three hikers set out on a ramble through the fields. The real Tolstoy can only be experienced in the countryside, Rilke had informed Lou, not in a city sitting inside a room. Upon their arrival, the host had greeted his guests in a self-patched smock, looking up from a manual task he was engrossed in. After an austere meal of groats and cabbage soup, Tolstoy had asked them both to go on a walk with him.

They had not yet reached the outer edge of the property when the old writer asked the young one: "What type of work do you do?"

Rilke's answer came quietly, rather timidly. "Poetry."

In response, Tolstoy delivered one blustering argument against all forms of poetry after the other. Before Rilke could defend his craft, Tolstoy's attention turned to another pilgrim, of which there were many in Yasnaya Polyana. The old man stepped towards Tolstoy and praised the great man's life and work with numerous genuflections and works, which he churned out so rapidly that Rilke, with his imperfect Russian, was unable to understand.

Tolstoy's admirers often travelled great distances to see him in Yasnaya Polyana. The author began to speak excitedly with the older man; for the moment, the guests from Germany appeared to have been forgotten. Lou and Rilke followed the two men but kept a respectful distance. Rilke could not take his eyes off the scene: every movement, every turn of the head, every pause was telling him: that was Tolstoy!

Since there was nothing else left to discuss for the moment, Lou returned to a topic that she had already brought up with her friend on their journey here.

“Let me demonstrate it with an example,” she began. “Take this old Russian and the wall next to us. Imagine, after a long journey, the old man’s strength abandons him just before his destination. In his frailty, he must lean on something, he groans under the blazing sun, slumps at the foot of the wall, then onto the ground, and dies.”

“He dies?” asked Rilke, surprised. “That’s… disappointing.”

“What else is it?”

“Tragic.”

“And what else?”

“It’s…” Rilke gave her an astonished look. “It’s kitsch,” he answered with a smile. “An old man who drags himself along a wall in the sweltering heat and drops dead, that’s pure kitsch.”

Lou stretched out her hands in a telling gesture.

“That’s the answer you wanted to hear from me?” Rilke stood still. “Well, you’ve coaxed it out of me. But why?”

“Because there are some similarities with your poem.”

“Which one?”

“The one about the rose. Why are there always so many roses? I mean the part with the lone rose.”

“You don’t like the lone little rose?”

“Dear lone little rose… That’s like the man dying against the wall.”

“So, you’re saying I have written something kitschy?”

She lifted her shoulders, smiling. “Even if the rest is good, unfortunately, the lone little rose is…” She took his arm. “Even for the poet of the unspeakable, that line is truly unspeakable.”

Rilke stooped down and plucked a cornflower from the roadside, which he handed to Lou with a bow. “Then I shall change that line.”

She sniffed at the flower, which didn’t emanate even the faintest smell. “Thank you.” Arm in arm, they followed Leo Tolstoy and his acolyte.

Shortly afterwards, the pilgrim left, repeating a phrase like a prayer: “Ah, it is so wonderful to have seen you again!”

The visitors caught up with Tolstoy. It was early summer, and the meadow was brimming with flowers. They were tall and so vibrant in colour, of the kind that one only finds in Russian soils. Even in the shade of the forest, countless forget-me-nots covered the marshy ground. Suddenly, to Lou and Rilke’s amazement, Tolstoy stooped down and ripped out a tuft of forget-me-nots with his bare hand, like he was trying to catch a butterfly, held it to his face and bit off some petals.

“Aren’t forget-me-nots poisonous?” asked Rilke.

“Try it yourself.”

Rilke shrunk back. “Lev Nikolayevich, you are used to the food that grows naturally in this area. My stomach, I’m afraid, will reject this unfamiliar dish.”

“They actually are poisonous.” Tolstoy observed the little bouquet. “But each poison has its positive properties, and in this case, it is the ability to reduce inflammation. Come now, try it.”

With some hesitation, Rilke took a single petal to his lips and bit such a tiny piece of it that the writer stuffed the whole flower in Rilke's mouth, laughing.

He chewed puckering his lips, retched, but didn't dare to spit out what this titan had given him. "Thank you, Lev Nikolayevich," was all he could utter.

From a distance, the pilgrim's call sounded, only vaguely audible now: "Ah, it is so wonderful to have seen you again!"

Several hundred versts to the north of Tolstoy's property, after they had travelled along the Volga against the current on a steamboat, they holed up in an izba in Yaroslavl for a while.

An izba was a traditional Russian cabin, which was constructed by laying a square frame made from tree trunks on the bare ground, with no nails. The whole log cabin was built on this framework, and it was arranged around a central oven: a place to cook, and at the same time, a place to sleep next to in the winter. It was also the place where the Domovoy, the household spirit, would hide. Their izba was still new, and the raw wood had a pleasant smell of resin. There was practically nothing in the house, except for a bench that ran along all four walls, a samovar, and on the floor, a sack that had been filled with fresh hay by the farmer. Since the marital status of the travellers was unclear, the woman pointed to a second haybox in the nearby stable. "In case the one in this room isn't large enough," she said.

In the early hours of the morning, they sat on the doorstep with the steaming samovar in front of them and watched the chickens, who came scurrying over curiously, as though they were coming to personally deliver an egg.

"The izba is the epitome of Russia," said Rilke.

"It conjures an image of Russia to you," she smiled. "Your own personal Russia."

“The carved gable, the uninterrupted peasant colours, which the summers and winters let decide if they’ll turn dark or light as they weather – everything here just *is*! Here lives a people whose history tells of hardship and misery, yet whose nature knows how to weave together submission and confidence in such a wonderful way.”

She put her arm around him. “Just to be guests here, even for a moment: it’s right for us.”

“It’s exactly what I had been longing for. And exactly what I need to create my work.”

In the evening, Rilke helped her out of her summery dress. They laughed as his vest got caught in her undershirt, and they began to kiss.

“Extinguish my eyes, I’ll go on seeing you,” he whispered.

Lou didn’t like it when he talked during lovemaking, but for him it was important, it gave him courage.

“Break off my arms, I’ll take hold of you with my heart.”

She loved the poem, which she had defended from being burned in a ritual fire in Wolfratshausen, but at that moment, she was glad that it was so short.

The next day, they sat by a dead, boggy branch of the Volga and watched the farmers who, now that the hunting season was gone, were shooting at birds so tiny that they were barely suitable for a meal.

“Murdering to kill the time,” murmured Rilke and clapped his hands so that the birds would fly away, but this only drove them more relentlessly towards the hunters’ shotguns.

Around noon, they had a meal in the only inn in the area that served anything to eat. Rilke enjoyed the rustic food. “It’s *potage au chou à la Russe*,” he gushed about the drab

cabbage soup. “If you had a restaurant in Paris, Agafia, it would drive the famous *L’Angleterre* out of business.”

The peasant woman had no idea what he was talking about, but she gave him some more soup.

“Do you miss Berlin?” asked Lou.

“Babylon? On the contrary. I’m dreading the day we’ll have to go back there.”

In the afternoon, it was the reapers who caught his attention. The first grass crop of the year was being fetched from the meadows. In long rows, men stripped to the waist let their scythes glide through the tall blades. Their rhythm made way for a tune sung by a farmgirl on the neighbouring hill as she sharpened her scythe, which had gone dull.

Rilke had someone pass him one of the tools and asked a reaper to show him the right sequence of motions. He took off his vest and skirt, rolled up his sleeves, swung the scythe once, twice across the grass, then, panting, he gave the instrument back. The farmgirl laughed; he was offended.

“You look happier than I will ever be,” said Rilke in German. She handed him a bowl of milk.

That night, a change emerged in Rilke. Lou thought it was a physical condition at first, but she could not ignore his eruptive state of anxiety. In the morning, she didn’t find him lying beside her on the hay, so she hastily threw on a shawl and went looking for him outside. He heard her, saw her come very close to where he was, but he didn’t stir. Lou called him, no answer. High up in the hollow of a haystack, he sat like a bird who didn’t want to be found. Around him, the mist of the Volga bathed the world in a dreamy, rosy light. Finally, he sprang down from the haystack, startling Lou.

She got an even bigger scare towards noon, during their walk in the woods. Suddenly, he stood still, refusing to go past a certain acacia tree. “Do you see it too?” he asked, shivering.

Since she did not understand, she nodded randomly towards the trees, which all looked the same to her.

Rilke’s eyes widened with an incredible horror.

“But it’s not that one! No! That other one there!” he called out, and didn’t dare take another step toward the acacia.

Lou realised that to Rilke, the tree was transforming into a ghost.