

Rilke, Rainer Maria. "Some Reflections on Dolls." in *Where Silence Reigns: Selected Prose*. trans. G. Craig Houston. New York: New Directions, 1978. 43-50.

Some Reflections on Dolls

(Occasioned by the wax dolls of Lotte Pritzel)

In order to define the sphere within which the existence of these dolls falls, one might conjecture concerning them that there are no children in their lives: this would be, in a certain sense, the condition of their origin, that the world of children was past and over. In these figures the doll has at last outgrown the understanding, the sympathy, the pleasure, and the sorrow of the child, it has become independent, grown-up, prematurely old, it has entered upon all the unrealities of its own life.

Have we not asked ourselves a thousand times anent the plump, unchanging dolls of childhood, as we do in the case of certain students, what will they be later? Are these then the grown-up versions of those doll-childhoods, which were pampered to excess by real and enacted emotions? Are these the fruits which they fleetingly reflected in humanly saturated atmosphere? The sham fruits, the germ of which knew no rest, being now almost washed away by tears, and now exposed to the arid heat of anger or to the void of forgetfulness; planted in the softest depth of a tenderness infinitely experimental and torn out again a hundred times, flung into a corner amongst sharp-edged broken objects, scorned, spurned, done with.

Fed like the "Ka" on imaginary food, when it seemed absolutely essential that they should be given real food, they messed themselves with it like spoiled children, being impenetrable and incapable of absorbing, at any point, even a drop of water in their extreme state of well-enough known solidity; without any judgment of their own, acquiescent towards every rag, and yet, once it was theirs, possessing it in their own careless, complacent, unclean manner; awake only at the moment of opening their eyes, then immediately continuing to sleep with their disproportionate, mobile eyes open, scarcely capable, indeed, of distinguishing whether it was the mechanical lid or that other thing, the air, which lay upon them; indolent, dragged about through the changing emotions of the day, remaining where they lie; made a confidant, a confederate, like a dog, not, however, receptive and forgetful like a dog, but in both cases a burden; initiated into the first, nameless experiences of their owners, lying about in their earliest uncanny lonelinesses, as in the midst of empty rooms, as if all they had to do was to exploit unfeelingly the new spaciousness with all their limbs—taken into cots, dragged into the heavy folds of illnesses, present in dreams, involved in the fatalities of nights of fever: such were these dolls. For they themselves never made any effort in all this; they lay there on the border of the children's sleep, filled, at most, with the rudimentary idea of falling down, allowing themselves to *be dreamed*; as it was their habit, during the day, to be lived unwearily with energies not their own.

When one thinks how grateful other things are for tender treatment, how they recover under it, indeed, how they feel even the hardest usage to be a consuming caress, provided only that they are loved, a caress which, no doubt, wears them away, but beneath which they take, as it were, courage which permeates them the more strongly, the more their body gives way (it makes them almost mortal, in a higher sense, so that they are able to share with us that grief which is our greatest possession); when we consider this and recall the sensitive beauty that certain things

have been able to appropriate, which have been thoroughly and intimately incorporated in human life; I am not saying even that it is necessary to visit the rooms of the *Armeria* in Madrid and to admire the suits of armour, helmets, daggers, and two-handed swords, in which the pure, clever art of the armourer is immeasurably excelled by that something which the proud and fiery use of them has added to these weapons; I am not thinking of the smiling and the weeping which lie hidden in much-worn jewels; I do not dare to think of a certain pearl, in which the uncertain nature of its subaqueous world had gained such heightened spiritual significance that the whole inscrutability of destiny seemed to utter its lament in that innocent pearl-drop; I pass over the intimate, the touching, the deserted, thoughtful aspect of many things, which, as I passed them, moved me deeply by their beautiful participation in human living; I will only cite in passing quite simple things: a sewing clamp, a spinning-wheel, a domestic loom, a bridal glove, a cup, the binding and the leaves of a Bible; not to speak of the mighty will of a hammer, the self-surrender of a violin, the friendly eagerness of horn spectacles,—indeed, only throw that pack of cards on the table, with which patience has been played so often, and it forms at once the centre of melancholy hopes, which have long since been realized in ways not hoped for. If we were to bring all this to mind again and at the same moment to find one of these dolls—pulling it out from a pile of more responsive things—it would almost anger us with its frightful obese forgetfulness, the hatred, which undoubtedly has always been a part of our relationship to it unconsciously, would break out, it would lie before us unmasked as the horrible foreign body on which we had wasted our purest ardour; as the externally painted watery corpse, which floated and swam on the flood-tides of our affection, until we were on dry land again and left it lying forgotten in some undergrowth. I know, I know it was necessary for us to have things of this kind, which acquiesced in everything. The simplest love relationships were quite beyond our comprehension, we could not possibly have lived and had dealings with a person who *was* something; at most, we could only have entered into such a person and have lost ourselves there. With the doll we were forced to assert ourselves, for, had we surrendered ourselves to it, there would then have been no one there at all. It made no response whatever, so that we were put in the position of having to take over the part it should have played, of having to split our gradually enlarging personality into part and counterpart; in a sense, through it to keep the world, which was entering into us on all sides, at a distance. The things which were happening to us incomprehensibly we mixed in the doll, as in a test tube, and saw them there change colour and boil up. That is to say, we *invented* that also, it was so abysmally devoid of phantasy, that our imagination became inexhaustible in dealing with it. For hours together, for whole weeks we were content to lay the first downlike silk of our hearts in folds against this motionless mannequin, but I cannot help thinking that there were certain all too lengthy afternoons in. which our twofold inspirations flagged, and suddenly we sat facing it, expecting something from it. It may be that there was then one of those things lying near, which are ugly and shabby by nature and consequently full of their own opinions, the head of an indestructible Casper, a half-broken horse, or something that made a noise and that could hardly wait to, submerge us and the whole room by exerting its full powers. But even if this was not so; if there was nothing lying there to suggest other thoughts to us, if that creature without occupation continued, in its stupid stolidity, to put on airs, ignorant, like a peasant Danaë, of everything but the ceaseless golden rain of our inventiveness: I wish I could remember if we inveighed against it, flew into a passion and let the monster know that our patience was at an end? If, standing in front of it and trembling with rage, we did not demand to know, item by item, what actual use it was making of all these riches. It was silent then, not deliberately, it was silent because that was its constant mode of evasion, because it was made of

useless and entirely irresponsible material, was silent, and the idea did not occur to it to take some credit to itself on that score, although it could not but gain great importance thereby in a world in which Destiny, and even God Himself, have become famous above all because they answer us with silence. At a time when everyone was still intent on giving us a quick and reassuring answer, the doll was the first to inflict on us that tremendous silence (larger than life) which was later to come to us repeatedly out of space, whenever we approached the frontiers of our existence at any point. It was facing the doll, as it stared at us, that we experienced for the first time (or am I mistaken?) that emptiness of feeling, that heart-pause, in which we should perish did not the whole, gently persisting Nature then lift us across abysses like some lifeless thing. Are we not strange creatures to let ourselves go and to be induced to place our earliest affections where they remain hopeless? So that everywhere there was imparted to that most spontaneous tenderness the bitterness of knowing that it was in vain? Who knows if such memories have not caused many a man afterwards, out there in life, to suspect that he is not lovable? If the influence of their doll does not continue to work disastrously in this and that person, so that they pursue vague satisfactions, simply in opposition to the state of unsatisfied desire by which it ruined their lives? I remember seeing, in the hands of the children of a manor house on a lonely Russian estate, an old inherited doll which the whole family resembled. A poet might succumb to the domination of a marionette, for the marionette has only imagination. The doll has none, and is precisely so much less than a thing as the marionette is more. But this being-less-than-a-thing, in its utter irremediability, is the secret of its superiority. The child must accustom itself to things, it must accept them, each thing has its pride. Things put up with the doll, none of them love it, we might imagine that the table throws it down, scarcely have we withdrawn our glance, before it is lying once more on the floor. Beginners in the world, as we were, we could not feel superior to any thing except, at most, to such a half-object as this, given to us the way some broken fragment is given to the creatures in aquariums, so that it may serve them as a measure and landmark in the world around them. We took our bearings from the doll. It was by nature on a lower level than ourselves, so that we could flow towards it imperceptibly, find ourselves in it and recognize our new surroundings in it, even if a little dimly. But we soon realized that we could not make a person or a thing of it, and at such moments it became a stranger to us, and all the confidences we had poured into and over it became foreign to us.

But that, in spite of all this, we did not make an idol of you, you sack, and did not perish in the fear of you, that was, I tell you, because we were not thinking of *you* at all. We were thinking of something quite different, an invisible Something, which we held high above you and ourselves, secretly and with foreboding, and for which both we and you were, so to say, merely pretexts, we were thinking of a soul: the doll-soul.

Great, courageous soul of the rocking-horse, you rocking breakers tossing the boy's heart, soul that agitated the air of the play-room until it frenzied as over the world's famous battlefields, proud, credible, almost visible soul. How you made the walls, the cross-work of the windows, the daily horizons tremble, as though the storms of the future were already shaking these most provisional conventions, which, in the stationariness of the afternoons, could appear so invincible. Ah! how you swept one away, you rocking-horse soul, away and into the realm of the irresistibly heroic, where one perished gloriously and glowingly with one's hair in the most frightful disorder. And there you lay, doll, and had not enough innocence to understand that your St. George was rolling beneath him the beast of your stupidity, the dragon that turned the most

surging tides of our emotions into a solid mass within you, into a perfidious, indifferent unbreakableness. Or you, convinced soul of the tramway, that was almost able to get the better of us when we travelled round the room, believing even only a little in our tram nature. You, souls of all these solitary games and adventures; ingenuously complaisant soul of the ball, soul in the smell of the domino pieces, inexhaustible soul of the picture book. Soul of the school satchel, towards which we felt a little distrustful because it was often so obviously on the side of the grown-ups; dumb soul of the tube of the good little trumpet: how amiable you all were and almost comprehensible. Only you, doll's soul, one could never say exactly where you really were. Whether you were in oneself or in the sleepy creature over there, whom one constantly endowed with you; undoubtedly we often relied upon one another, and in the end neither of us had you, and you were trodden under foot. When were you ever really present? On a birthday morning perhaps, when a new doll sat there and seemed almost to appropriate some bodily warmth from the still warm cake beside it? Or on the eve of Christmas, when the dolls we already possessed felt the over-ruling proximity of our future dolls through the door of the room which had been closed to us for days? Or—what is more probable—when a doll suddenly fell down and became ugly: then, for a second, it was as if you were taken off your guard. And you were, I believe, capable of giving pain as indefinite as the beginning of toothache, when we don't yet know just where it is going to be, when the favourite doll, Anna, was suddenly lost, not to be found again for ever: was gone. But fundamentally one was so busy keeping you alive that one had no time to determine what you were. I cannot say what it is like, when a little girl dies and refuses, even at the very end, to let go one of her dolls (perhaps one which had always been quite neglected), so that the poor thing is completely dry and withered in the consuming heat of her feverish hand, caught up into the Serious, the Ultimate: does a little bit of soul then form within it, curious to see a real soul?

O doll-soul, not made by God, you soul, asked for capriciously from some thoughtless fairy, thing-soul breathed forth by an idol with mighty effort, which we have all, half timidly, half magnanimously received and from which no one can entirely withdraw himself, O soul, that has never been really worn, that has only been kept always stored up (like furs in summer), protected by all kinds of old-fashioned odours: look, now the moths have got into you. You have been left untouched too long, now a hand both careful and mischievous is shaking you—look, look, all the little woebegone moths are fluttering out of you, indescribably mortal, beginning, even at the moment when they find themselves, to bid themselves farewell.

And so, in the end, we have quite destroyed you, doll-soul, whilst thinking to care for you in our dolls; they were, after all, the maggots which ate you away—that is the explanation why they were so fat and inert and why they could not be got to take any more food.

Now this new, timid race escapes and flutters through our subconscious feeling. Perceiving it, we are tempted to say that they are little sighs, so tenuous that our hearing is not sufficient for them, they appear, as they vanish, on the quiveringmost borders of our vision. For this is their only concern: to fade away. Sexless as the dolls of childhood were, they can find no decease in their stagnant ecstasy, which has neither inflow nor outflow. It is as if they were consumed with the desire for a beautiful flame, into which they might fling themselves after the manner of moths (and then the immediate smell of their burning would inundate us with limitless, hitherto

unknown emotions). Reflecting thus and looking up, one is confronted and almost overwhelmed by their waxen nature.