

The Tiny Town

*In Dialogue with Rainer Maria Rilke
on that small, afraid, formidable place in all of us*

There is something about the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke that inspires the seeker's heart, and quickens the lover's mind. In *each* of us is a seeker, a lover, and the two are not two at all. For what does the seeker seek but love? And what is love but a searching unto finding at last the one who lays all search to rest? A gifted poet with an eye toward the unobvious, Rilke captures this dynamism without taming it, names it in symbol and sign without pinning it down. In the very last year of the 19th century, Rilke embarked on a journey which revealed itself to be more of a spiritual pilgrimage than a pedestrian trip. It was there, in Russia at age twenty-three, that a spiritual longing was recognized in territory at once unfamiliar yet welcomingly his own. The formidable and gorgeous Russian planes mentally sequestered and stole him from a life in Prague now revealed to be too narrow for his brimming wideness. Upon his return home, Rilke's first major offering, *The Book of Hours*—a collection of poems arranged according to three broadly archetypal themes (monastic life, pilgrimage, and poverty and death)—flowed as more of an emanating emergence than a calculated composition. From the fullness of his heart, his experience spoke itself onto the page.

One of these poems, from the second thematic arrangement of “pilgrimage”, evokes for the reader an image of a sparsely inhabited exterior place, a “tiny town”. This place, if we read with enough subtlety and care, points beyond itself and back to our own all-too-often sparsely inhabited interior place, that place of fear and longing, daring and untold depth that is the tiny town of the heart. Here are Rilke's lines:

*In this town the last house stands
as lonely as if it were the last house in the world...
The tiny town is only a passing-over place,
worried and afraid, between two huge spaces—
...And those who leave the town wander a long way off
and many perhaps die on the road.*

What comes to mind when we read these words? For all of us, something different, no doubt; and yet, something surely strikingly and remarkably the same. The human experience is so detailed that no two lives across the vast expanse of time ever stride with identical lengths or tones. And yet, when themes of loneliness are sounded, each heart perks its ear to hear more of this wistful song. For we all know the melodies, the movements, the predictable unpredictabilities which have us so often standing as wayfarers alone together. Here in this place, we set foot as solitary companions onto the road back to a home we once knew yet cannot *quite* touch with our remembrance. It is not so much that the poet's words become our own, but that we become the poet's words: an inexpressible utterance, yet craning somehow, someway to be voiced, to be heard, to be known. We whimsically "see" in the mind's eye Rilke's "tiny town", for how can we not? It lives, this tiny town, in each one of us. This town, the very heart of man-in-God, does not grow, nor shrink or recede. Its tininess is its formidability and its quiet unmoveable strength.

With these first lines, we focus in on the town's edge:

*In this town the last house stands
as lonely as if it were the last house in the world...*

We are invited first to focus our gaze and envision this "last house", a kind of last stand on the blighted land of a life more spent than lived. Who has lived there? Who might live there now? Was there joy in this house that surely once was not "last", but set yesteryear in the midst of many, perhaps even "first" among them? Is there joy there now? And if so, from where or from whom does that joy arise? Does it arise from present-day reasons of substance, or from a nostalgia that ebbs with the last of the ember flames now barely held in a coal-fed fire? Many more questions can and do arise, all of them worthy, for all are in essence about *lives*, and not, as appearances would suggest, the buildings they lived in. The buildings are pointers to the questions' answers, and the answers themselves are a lifetime of pondering, just from this *one* last house on a town's ghost-like edge.

What lies *beyond* the "last house"? A forested brigade? A boundaried, unlivened and unliveable field? A burned periphery where life may have been, but now, could never be? Or is it just night, a starscaped sky spanning into a quiet and rested reverie? Images may abound as we ponder this place with reverence, and we would be wise to let them run. For we begin to see that this town, this house, these periscoped and horoscoped possibilities are everyman's, are this man's, are *ours*.

The next lines beckon us to live in the space of those manifold possibilities:

*The tiny town is only a passing-over place,
worried and afraid, between two huge spaces—*

Is this a contradiction? A “passing-over place”, yet “worried and afraid”? If I need not dwell in the dulled pain of this doldrum, and thus can pass safely through, why need I be afraid, and why worry? This is the fall unblessedly at play in each of us. We worry and we fear when we *do not know* that there is no true cause for such. And there never is. Only the faith that supersedes sight can tell us this, but faith takes remembering in a world conditioned to forget. That world, that amnesic reality, is the potential life of all on any given day, especially when those causeless causes for worry creep like the shadows in our poem’s “tiny town”. Shadows seem real to little ones, and we are all little ones when worried and afraid.

What to do, then? We begin with the wisdom which guides us toward what *not* to do. We do not abandon the tiny town, for that town is our most precious dwelling. It is our heart—the storehouse of memory, life, passion, virtue, and power that fuels a human life. A town holds many features and factors—commerce, play, worship, gathering, resting, rising, laboring, loving—and all of them are worthy. Such is the heart, a town that holds *so much* yet can feel or seem quiet abandoned at first glance, especially if the glance is forlornly trained. And what of those two “huge spaces” in between which our tiny town is set? Illusory phantoms, intimidating, but at last unreal. For space has no size, and so can be neither huge, small, or of any other measure. Space is as vast as the God which it analogizes, which is to say infinite, perfect, and free. *This* is what the tiny town of the heart is “in between”—it is not between anything at all, but set as a diamond into the cradle of eternity. If there are any spaces in between which our tiny town is set, we can call those spaces *capacity* and *promise*. This is the spacious expanse of our tiny town, even when we do not feel it to be so, for the heart is a home for God, Who cannot be intimidated or contained. What we “pass over” in our tiny town are those temporal things which are not worthy of our vocation to eternity. Proportion is established through a vision that is true. And a tiny town—so different than a city of industry or a metropolis of efficiency—allows that vision to be just so.

Our last couplet reads:

*...And those who leave the town wander a long way off
and many perhaps die on the road.*

Precisely. What is the world's lure but a constancy of tempestuous and tempting enticements to leave the tiny town of the heart? Hollow, tinsel, vacuous, and hologrammed are the commercials of uncapacious promise, and yet more than once the fool in all of us has blithely followed. And what awaits the pilgrim who falls prey to the unthinking ease of being a tourist instead? We know this story, too. Eternity is exchanged for temporality, majesty for banality, greatness for frivolity. The fruit's fancied allure seems sweet, and may be so upon first bite, but the horrid emptiness that rushes in to the unmoored soul who samples furnishes it with its own immediately decaying disappointment. That quiet voice that saves emerges again, and again: "I miss my tiny town". I miss my heart, my *home*: meant for inhabitation with the Divine Beloved, but substituted for what is far, *far* less than love divine. In these moments of choice, bereft of the mercy that would have held me true had I but allowed the *slightest* margin for my "yes", I have said "no", preferring what bedazzling delights rather than what joyfully fulfills. Instead of the narrow path, I have followed the wide way, counting myself among the many who, as our poem expresses, "die on the road". Freedom—which is none but Love—would not grasp my hand to pull me to a safety that anesthetizes, for the very act itself would have stolen freedom from me. And for this I am eternally grateful to Eternity...for that would not be love at all.

This poem is no pessimistic condemnation, no sad story to riff upon or sip like fine wine. It is beautiful. It is an invitation couched in the kind of warning that shows the good to hope for, and the good that *we are*, even if through a lens that is melancholically veiled. Poetry is a connoisseur of irony, and that which is contained in these wistful lines from Rilke is this: If we see our heart as a "tiny town", we see its capacity for greatness. And if we are willing to abide there without abandoning our post, we will live there with a Love that is perfect and true.

Sahaja Bodha

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September 10th, 2026

Nocatee, Florida