

THE SONNETS OF PETRARCH

Translated by Joseph Auslander
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DURING THE LIFE OF LAURA

I. Wherein Petrarch confesses his folly

O ye that hear in vagrant rhymes the sighing
On which the headlong heart of youth went feeding,
When, still unseasoned, still at folly's leading
I turned from fears in sudden tenor flying
To hopes whose glitter proved no less a lying—
As variously related for your reading—
If ever from Love's arrow ye fled bleeding,
Pity, and pardon me this anguished crying!
But well I know how, I must walk derided,
A jest, a syllable in tavern chatter;
By self-reproach my self-deceit goes chided,
And shame is all the fruit my follies scatter—
Shame and a sense of pleasures that have glided
Like ghosts in a dream too trivial to matter.

III. Wherein he chides love that could wound him on a holy day (Good Friday)

It was the morning of that blessed day
Whereon the Sun in pity veiled his glare
For the Lord's agony, that, unaware,
I fell a captive, Lady, to the sway
Of your swift eyes: that seemed no time to stay
The strokes of Love: I stepped into the snare
Secure, with no suspicion: then and there
I found my cue in man's most tragic play.
Love caught me naked to his shaft, his sheaf,
The entrance for his ambush and surprise
Against the heart wide open through the eyes,
The constant gate and fountain of my grief:
How craven so to strike me stricken so,
Yet from you fully armed conceal his bow!

XII. Wherein he is brought by Laura's loveliness to the contemplation of the highest excellence.

When Love his flaming image on her brow
Enthrones in perfect beauty like a star,
As far as she outshines the rest, so far
I feel the blaze of passion surge and grow.
Yet still I bless the place, the hour when so
Supremely high, at light so singular
I dared to look: "O heart, you blessed are
To gaze upon that pure, that golden glow,"
I murmur. "She inspired the splendid thought
Which points to heaven and teaches honest eyes
All worldly lures and winnings to despise:
Through her that gentle grace of love is taught
Which by the straight path leads to paradise,
And even here hope's holy crown is wrought."

XV. Wherein he recounts his state when Laura is present and when she leaves him

Tears, bitter tears fall in a bitter rain,
And my heart trembles with a storm of sighs
When on your beauty bend my burning eyes,
For whose sole sake the world seems flat and vain.
But ah, when I can see that smile again,
That chaste, sweet, delicate smile, then passion dies
Withered in its own flaming agonies
Gazing upon you, passion is lost and pain.
But all too soon my very soul is rocked
When you depart and with your passing dear
Pluck from my perilous heaven my stars, O Sweet!
Then at the last, by Love's own keys unlocked,
My soul from out my body leaping clear
On wings of meditation finds your feet.

XXV. On Laura perilously ill

The nearer I approach that final day,
Which seems to tint an end to human woe,
The more I see how swiftly Time can flow,
And how Time's promise was an empty play.
No more concerning Love; henceforth we may
Dismiss Love's counsel, for like recent snow
The hard and heavy load of Yes and No

Dissolves and yields the peace for which we pray.
And with our hopes, as with our bodies, peace—
Our hopes which here so long beguiled our hearts;
Laughter and tears, terror and pride shall cease:
And we shall see with purged eyes in what parts
Our worldly eyes betrayed us, knowing why
So often and so vainly we would sigh.

LIV. Wherein he marvels that he is not yet weary of living, thinking, writing her

Already I grow weary thinking how,
Unwearying, my thoughts upon thee dwell,
And how to life they cling as to their hell
When they might quit their sighing at one blow;
And how of that sweet face, that hair, that brow,
Those eyes, the sun's pure golden citadel,
By day and night naming thy name I tell
Their virtues in my beads until they glow!
And how my feet, not tired, not broken, still
Following thy dear footsteps everywhere,
Mount uselessly a never-ending stair;
And whence the ink, the paper which I fill
With thee? If incompletely I declare thee,
Blame not the art but blame the love I bear thee.

CXXIX. Wherein he envies whatsoever of lovely in nature her presence makes lovelier

O rich and happy flowers forever apart
On which my pensive lady puts her heel!
O golden acres privileged -to feel
Her phrase, her footprints pressed upon your heart!
Trees silver green with April's earliest 'art;
Pale passionate violets; dark grove that can steal
Only so much of sun as may reveal
Your swarthy steeples in a radiant dart!
O comely landscape! O translucent stream
Mirroring her pure face; her intense eyes
And seizing all alive their bluest beam!
I envy you your crystal burglaries!
No rock, however cold, but with my theme
Shall henceforth kindle and consume in sighs.

CXXXV. Wherein hope will outlast life

Love bringing back to mind that princely thought
Which is the old familiar of our lives,
Comforts me well, saying our prospect thrives
As never before, nearer and nearer brought
To heaven. I, who have seen his whispers fraught
With double meanings where half-truth still strives
With deadly untruth, hang between two hives
Suspended, Yea and Nay at quarrel caught.
Meantime the years move on, and I behold
Mirrored in my true glass the traitor Time
Whose threats her promise and my hope enfold:
Ah well, so be it: Age commits his crime
Not on me only; nor will Love grow old:
But O the short years and the long, long climb!

CLIV. Wherein only the ancient elders of song are worthy to sing her virtues

The youthful Alexander at the tomb
Of fierce Achilles sighed awhile and said:
"O Fortunate! whom Homer trumpeted
Over the earth and lifted from our doom!"
But ah! beyond oblivion and the gloom
Of dusty death shall that adorable head
Of gold go down to sleep ungarlanded
Save of the faint few roses. I presume
To weave upon her? Homer and Orpheus,
Mantua's shepherd poet¹ should proclaim
The beauty that were wind and fire and flame
To stretch their souls! Alas, that unto us
By unpropitious stars the task is given
Whose cloud of praises must affront her heaven!

¹ Virgil

AFTER THE DEATH OF LAURA

I. Wherein he receives tidings of Laura's death

Alas! that liquid look, that lovely face!
Alas! the poised grace of that golden head!
Alas! the sweetness of the words she said
That soothed the savage breast, raised up the base!
Alas! the smile—that dart which I embrace,
Whose hope is death now that all hope is dead;
O hadst thou not so late inhabited
This earth, how queenly would have been thy place!
In thee I burn, in thee still draw my breath,
Being all thine. Death now has disciplined
All lesser pain to nothing; no sharp teeth
Can gnaw the constant grief-bright music dinned
By the last words, snatched up by jealous Death
To vanish with their hope upon the wind.

IV. Wherein he finds no respite

Life rushes by on proud impatient feet,
And Death pursues her with a massive stride;
Ills past and present tear the soul aside,
With pain the future threatens to repeat:
I look before and after—pain I meet;
A thousand menaces my peace deride;
Ah, were not pity so involved with pride,
Long, long ago I should have found death sweet!
If ever any joy this heart has known,
Memory on it broods while, tempest-battered,
The winds still howl, the sinister heavens frown;
Even in port no truce prevents this war:
My pilot faint, mast split and sails all shattered,
And sunk forever my accustomed star.

XXVI. Wherein her death has left him only the philosophy of despair

She stepped into my heart so vividly,
A thing of light and warmth!- as well unknown,
A princess, having wandered from her throne,
Might crowd a peasant's but with courtesy.
And she is dead!-and dead my soul in me;
She storms the stars!-and I could turn a stone

To blood and tears of blood: but there is none
To tell love's pain and my soul's poverty.
These plead too deep for any ears save mine,
Who sing, with equal emptiness oppressed,
As moans the bird about a barren nest.
Ah, we are shadows crying for a sign!
Ah, sick and sightless stares the human will!
Ah, hope is a mirage that cheats us still!

XXX. Wherein to recall the past is to augment the despair of the present

When I look back upon the fugitive time
Which swept my noblest ecstasies to doom,
And spilled the fire and trampled the white plume
And weighted down with tears the wings of rhyme;
And when I see Love turned to pantomime,
The dream derided, and the double bloom
Of flesh and spirit betrayed—half to the tomb,
And half to heaven—O cruel celestial crime!—
Then like one drugged and rifled, I awake,
And still in stupor, feel the wind and stare
At both my hands and body stripped, and quake,
Remembering lutes and sleep with purple hair ...
O Stars like stone! O Death! Black Day! Blind Fate!
How you have done me to this dark estate!

XLII. The spring returns, but not to hint returns

The spring returns, the spring wind softly blowing
Sprinkles the grass with gleam and glitter of showers,
Powdering pearl and diamond, dripping with flowers,
Dropping wet flowers, dancing the winter's going;
The swallow twitters, the groves of midnight are glowing
With nightingale music and madness; the sweet fierce powers
Of Love flame up through the earth; the seed-soul towers
And trembles; Nature is filled to overflowing ...
The spring returns, but there is no returning
Of spring for me. O heart with anguish burning!
She that unlocked all April in a breath
Returns not ... And these meadows, blossoms, birds,
These lovely gentle girls—words, empty words,
As bitter as the black estates of death!

XC. Wherein a grieving bird reminds him of his own heavier anguish

Sweet wandering bird, that on the branch you swing to
Pour such impartial music or in phrases
Darkened with imminent winter mourn dead graces
As song dies with the summer that you sing to –
Ah could you guess the bitter bough I cling to,
Your golden grief would find in mine clear traces
Of kinship! In my heart your singing space is;
One song is ours, one measure we both ring to.
And yet who knows? The grief you give a name to
May not endure: some bough she could not leap to,
A bruised wing, maybe, holds the mate you weep to;
Not so my theme, my sweet I pour this flame to:
Death and this bleak day, thoughts my soul must keep to,
Prompt me to call what Death alone has claim to.