A Year of Mourning
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Poems 271–322 of
Petrarch’s
Rerum vulgarium fragmenta

TRANSLATED BY
Lee Harlin Bahan
In Memory of Scotty Turley
Poem 271 begins a segment of 52 sonnets. The date I attach to 271 is January first, New Year’s Day, and I would like to suggest that symbolically those 52 sonnets form a year of mourning.

—Thomas P. Roche, Jr.,
“The Calendrical Structure of Petrarch’s Canzoniere”

O life of ours, looking to be so fair,
how cursorily you ruin in one morning
what a lot of years of great pain bought.

—Francesco Petrarca,
Rerum vulgarium fragmenta 269 (trans. L.H.B.)

And that’s what all the very greatest masters do. . . .
They make jokes.

—Donna Tartt,
The Goldfinch
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Francesco Petrarca, Petrarch to English speakers, 1304–1374, was the son of political refugees who fled Italy to settle near Avignon, France. Wanting to be a poet, Petrarch dropped out of law school when his father died, and returned to Avignon where, he claims, he fell in love at first sight of Laura, a married woman as God-fearing as she was beautiful, during Good Friday service in 1327. The event inspired a book called in Italian Canzoniere, “songbook,” and Rime sparse, “rhymes spread (by word of mouth or in handwriting).”

Less well known is the work’s official Latin title, Rerum vulgarium fragmenta, “partial text about common things.” I prefer this title because its three words remind us that Latin was the language of Medieval high culture while the people of Italy spoke Italian in everyday life, and conjure sepia ink on scraps of discarded parchment showing that love and life’s brevity are universal human concerns, and hint that the speaker has a thing for this lady so the subtext can get a little trashy. A web of such wordplay—studded with classical and Biblical allusions, and a cast of shifting images—holds together Petrarch’s lyric account of unrequited love for a woman during her physical life and after she died of bubonic plague in 1348. In my opinion, Rerum vulgarium fragmenta fueled the Elizabethan literary achievement and informs Western popular song to this day.
Unsurprisingly, seven hundred years later, English translations
of Petrarch abound; I have nineteen volumes of them. I feel more
blessed than cursed to have come to this party late; every Petrarch
translation I’ve read has taught me something or prompted my
admiration in some way, so, the more the merrier. In fact, because
plenty of scholarly and traditional translations privilege meanings
that foreground the beautiful surfaces of Petrarch’s work, I’m
freer to privilege meanings that foreground an ugly form of
eros, hoping that readers in a secular and sexually explicit age
will take the speaker’s struggle seriously, recalling that comedy
is for those who think. Similarly, I doubt I do harm by clarifying
a source poem’s dramatic situation for readers who only have
“seen” Black Death on NCIS, or, now that a basic liberal arts
education is considered elitist, by supplying specifics of classical
myths to which Petrarch alludes.

Thomas Roche, though, gave me the means to turn Petrarch
from a building block of the ivory tower back into a bridge
between classical and modern culture. Briefly, Roche relates
the number of poems in Rerum vulgarium fragmenta to the
number of days in a leap year, such as 2012, and relates poems
271–322 to the fifty-two days before Lent in that year, where
Rvf 271 represents January 1, as well as to the number of weeks
in any year. What began as an experiment to test Roche’s ideas,
a cure for my desultory practice of translating Petrarch, yielded
a free-standing sonnet sequence that can be pitched in one
sentence: after a possible new love interest dies, the speaker
revisits scenes from his relationship with the real love of his life,
and, by mourning her untimely death, confronts his mortality.

While this excerpt panders to our twenty-first century
attention span, we still are introduced to the Olympic gymnastics
of Petrarch’s thought uninterrupted—and performed to songs we
know. Were Petrarch transported through time and space to the
present day, and the pan-galactic language whatsit were working,
he’d recognize the artistic ambition expressed in Pitchford’s lyrics
to “Fame.” If you’re familiar with the words to “Greensleeves,”
have heard Streisand performing “Evergreen,” and America singing “Sister Goldenhair,” you basically understand Petrarch’s use of lauro, “laurel,” a non-deciduous tree the leaves of which once crowned poet laureates, and of l’auro, “the gold,” to play on Laura’s name. Hammond’s and Hazelwood’s “The Air That I Breathe” addresses Petrarch’s other essential pun, l’aura, “the air” or “the breeze.” Come to think of it, since Jamestown was settled by people who could have seen premieres of Shakespeare’s plays, and the KJV Bible followed in their wake, the distance from Petrarch to Butcher Holler to crying into beer in Nashville, or to Wonder’s “You Are the Sunshine of My Life,” isn’t far.

Granted, politics as well as—the following is my guess—envy of Dante’s acclaim motivated Petrarch to use the language of the common people of Italy as opposed to Latin, the common language of literate Medieval Europeans; World War II showed how ugly nationalism can be. In translating Petrarch into my idiolect born of forty years among rural Americans and two degrees at a local university, letting his argument in this idiolect, to paraphrase Emerson, warp the iambic pentameter template, and by hybridizing Dickinson’s slant rhymes with the not at all ham-fisted rhyming of contemporary popular song lyrics, I’ve meant rather to illustrate the wisdom of Kelly’s opossum, Pogo: “Yep, son, we have met the enemy and he is us.” I use this quote not to advocate an intolerant return to full rhymes and strict meter, but to plead for inclusion and at least familial, if we can’t manage divine, compassion for our flawed humanity.

In this same vein, when I adopted and adapted the editorial practice of adding italicized titles to Petrarch’s poems, I told myself that I was eliminating the need for footnotes and other scholarly paraphernalia, having been taught in a graduate writing program to fear them almost more than abstractions; today when terms can be put in a search engine via technology from which most of us are inseparable, I might argue that I was saving myself time writing notes, and the world’s trees. As I worked my way through Rvf’271-322, though, I noticed I
was memorializing people I had lost—a neighbor, one of my husband’s groomsmen—and wound up dedicating the whole shebang to my college roommate who was beautiful and made clover-chains for her hair and died young. Revising my three-year-old manuscript for publication, I see that I refer to popular culture, snatches of songs that were like wallpaper when I was growing up (and still Carpool Karaoke to), and to authors who have passed into high culture, for the same reason that Petrarch compiled the leaves of his book and searched Europe for, found, and shared classical works long lost, and the March Hare who became Old Possum wrote The Waste Land. I’m shoring things against my own ruin, and because you’re reading this, and because I hope you’ll look for personal and cultural cognates by which to understand Petrarch and other people of other places and times, they’re shored against yours, too.

Lee Harlin Bahan

7 February 2017
A Year of Mourning
271: Winded

The blistering knot that held me while I tallied hours for twenty-one whole years has given way to Death, a heavyweight whose pull I’d not encountered, nor do I believe grief kills. Since my loss wasn’t Love’s desire, he stretched a new snare in the grass, heaped fresh kindling to start another fire, and so had me at great pains to escape.

If I’d not experienced being out of breath so much, I would’ve been picked up and burned, particularly since I’m less green wood.

I have my liberty again—knot torn in two, fire out, ashes spread—due to Death against whom brawn and brains aren’t any good.
272: *Bad trip*

Life runs away, not stopping for a break,  
and Death pounds right behind like infantry,  
and past and present things embattle me,  
and eventualities also attack,

and memory and anticipation rock  
my heart—up, down, back, forth—so, honestly,  
if not for showing myself a little mercy,  
I now would be past thoughts that make me ache.

If some place did my sad heart good, I head there in my mind; then, on the other hand,  
I see wild gusts put sailing on in doubt;

I see a storm in port, the pilot dead  
on his feet, masts broken, fabric flapping, and  
the pretty lights I used to make for, out.
273: Madeleine, with a nod to Mortimer

Poor soul, what’s with all this retrospection, when the good old days are irretrievable? Where’s the sense in providing fuel to intensify self-immolation?

The soft words and sweet looks that, one by one, you transcribed and depicted are celestial now, and how delinquent and irrational it is to look for them in this location you well know. Don’t bring what kills us to life again, or pursue fuzzy, fallacious arguments, but ones that point to a good end.

Pleased by nothing here, let’s seek Heaven: because we view that beauty dimly if, living and dead, our peace is wrung from us.
Peace, hard thoughts, please! Isn’t it sufficient that Love, Fortune, and Death beleaguer me, stand at the gate, without my running into more antagonists internally?

And are you, heart of mine, the same as ever, subjecting just me to your treachery, keeping barbarians under cover, consorting with my fast, slick enemy?

You’re where Love stashes surreptitious notes, and where Fortune rolls out its pageantry, and Death recalls the blow bound to turn my remains to dust, and where my roving thoughts get lies with which to arm themselves: that’s why I blame just you for all that’s wrong with me.

274: Jeremiah 17:9
275: *Shades of Orpheus, with a nod to Barnes*

My eyes, the light of our life has been eclipsed, rather, has ascended to shine in Heaven: we’ll see her there yet, there she waits, and even, considering our lateness, mourns perhaps.

My ears, angelic words come from her lips in a place a better hearing is given. My feet, the one by whom you used to be driven exists outside the purview of your steps.

Why, then, are you all making war on me? I didn’t blind or deafen you; neither did I trample hopes for her recovery.

Blame Death—rather, praise Him who frees and tethers, shuts and opens simultaneously, and after tears knows how to gladden others.
276: *Buboes*

Because abrupt departure from unhindered, angelic apprehension of her has taken my soul to quite a sad, stumped, horror-stricken place, I attempt to put my pain in words.

Fit sorrow—surely!—leads me to lament: Love and the one who caused it know my broken heart lacks any other cure for sickening details that occupy existence.

The one I couldn’t handle, Death, you finished; and where, Earth, glad a human face so fine is yours now to keep secret, watch, and cherish,

does that leave me, disconsolate and blind, since I don’t have the sweet, romantic, unblemished vision that induced my eyes to shine?
277: 2 Corinthians 4:8–9, KJV

If Love conveys no thoughts outside the box,
I’ll be hard-pressed not to abandon life:
remorse and terror give my spirit grief
because desire survives and hope was axed,

so that my life is totally perplexed,
despairing and in tears that won’t shut off,
tired, rudderless, its course doubtful and seas rough,
without a standby sure to fix this fix.

A mental image leads me, since my true
guide rests beneath—above us, I should say,
and shines more powerfully than ever through
my heart, not eyes: sad flesh combats each ray
of light so very much looked forward to,
and has me going prematurely gray.