

THE ALCHEMY  
OF GRACE

RAVENNA COLE

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DEVOTIONAL SONNETS  
AFTER VITTORIA COLONNA



IN THE WIND

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Vittoria Colonna, born in 1492, was an influential poet in the Italian Renaissance who became famous for her love sonnets. After her husband died, she devoted herself more and more completely to an austere life of prayer and solitude, and transformed the contemporary love sonnet into a devotional poetic form. Her spiritual sonnets were admired by some of the greatest minds of her time, including Michelangelo Buonarroti, who was taken by the spiritual seriousness of her work and became a close friend. Late in her life, Colonna gathered one hundred three sonnets in a handwritten manuscript for him that boldly explore the rugged terrain of the spiritual life, especially the fraught place of the artist in that landscape.

*The Alchemy of Grace* was written using the *Sonnets for Michelangelo* as a spiritual exercise. I tried, sonnet for sonnet, to find in myself the spiritual movement that gave rise to the sonnet, and then to write from that place, to feel the urgency and the difficulty of it. The poems preserve Colonna's Petrarchan sonnet form, retaining the specific variation she used for each individual sonnet. At the beginning, I almost wanted to translate them, to stay very close to Colonna's images and ideas; as the project developed, I began to think of my sonnets as "recompositions" of hers: related, but different. In the end, it became clear that however indebted my sonnets are to hers, and however impossible it would have been to write them without Colonna as my guide, what emerged is something wholly unexpected and new.

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I

THE ONLY MOUNTAIN

All I wanted after love left me was fame.  
I can't recall now what I hoped to find—  
lust grew like a snake in my gardened mind  
until love turned to blame, and blame, more blame.  
Let me write with nails your holy name;  
your blood my ink, make me patient and kind;  
let my words be on your lifeless body signed  
that others may know you suffered, you came.  
Why would I invoke Delos or Parnassus?  
You're the only island I long to reach,  
the only mountain I ever hope to climb.  
Let your sun shine on me as it passes us;  
let it warm me, enlighten me, and teach  
me, Lord, to find your truth in humble rhyme.

I I

COME TO YOUR TABLE

I want to walk behind you, Lord, up that  
impossible path, cross on my back, all  
light streaming from you. Only when I fall  
will I see what Peter saw, and say what  
he said, when he alone knew you. I thought  
I could hope this on my own, but I'm small;  
by your light alone find the door in the wall;  
every human hope is made of glass, but  
yours remains. O God, generous and sincere,  
if I could come to your table, all my  
desire for your food alone, all other  
desires being gone, I might be here,  
fully present and full, ready to die  
beside you, in the arms of your sweet mother.

I I I

TO SEE AND KNOW THE SUN

I want to look at it, to understand,  
the way I want to see and know the sun;  
but its fire remains unseen, my thoughts undone  
by the blinding light of true God and true man.  
Still, who would think this changing light could span  
a universe of darkness, warming one  
whose cold hope had long been on the run?  
Like a ray, he reaches out his wounded hand  
and unburdens worthless burdens of the world,  
then yokes my neck, gently, with his true yoke  
to lead me home. In the beautiful clear  
light I see my hidden, sinful heart pearled  
by humility, that sweet word he spoke  
which unlocks all the others. Lord, let me hear.

I V

WHERE WE LIGHTLY GO

Abyss of true light, immense and pure, you  
turn your kind and loving eyes toward us, we  
who crawl about the world like ants, not free  
but worldly-wise and hard of heart. Undo  
the hurtful wall of ignorance that grew  
like the lengthening shadow, cold and darkly,  
of the old Adam—impious enemy  
of your warm rays, clear and sure and new.  
O God my God, clothe us with living faith and  
loving fire; fold your law into our hearts like  
leaven; teach us to fly, to leave behind  
selfish desire, caught in itself like a lake.  
Beyond it, where we lightly go, your hand  
hands us the key your sweet gates to unlock.



V

OCEANIC LOVE

If I set before my small soul all of  
God's life-giving graces, I think I should  
fall like a raindrop into that all-good  
sea, wholly absorbed by oceanic love.  
And falling into that eternal wave,  
surfing swiftly from joy to joy, I would  
feel the smallness of what solid stood  
and death and all luck, good or bad, I might have.  
And holding fast to great ideals of youth,  
to ardent love for oceans, rivers, mountains,  
I'd feel the freeing rays of falling sun  
fall all around like bright liquid fountains  
that transform the world and hard hearts of men,  
disperse the shadows and demonstrate the truth.

V I

TRUST YOU MORE

I wish that I could trust you more, who feed  
the birds and clothe the lilies, but I'm still  
full of hope for the wrong thing, and my weak will  
still worries about all I want and need.  
Could I but hurt and suffer, want and bleed  
with joy, keeping my eyes fixed on that sweet hill  
where your opened side opened to me, hell  
might reveal its heaven and heaven, hell. Lord,  
this is the light you shine into my darkness  
where I learn to embrace what I avoid,  
letting love lead me into poverty  
and pain, letting go of all I vied  
to gain, standing before God in pure starkness  
against a pale sky, like a leafless tree.

V I I

HIGH HOPE AND HUMBLE KNOWING

My angelic escort, my armed guard, my  
guide—I need you. This twisted war is too  
much for me. When I stumble, as I do,  
help me to see God as you do, with high  
hope and humble knowing. I don't know why  
I so often think myself alone, with few  
who understand me, or care what is true,  
when you are here, who know, and care, and try.  
It should be a comfort to me, and it  
is, to know my life matters that much; but  
some days still difficult to believe. Help me  
to feel your presence when I can't know or see  
you—yes, help me to *feel*—to trust feeling lit  
from within—feeling the best weapon we've got.

V I I I

U N F E E L   T H E   P U L L

The waters of a world searching in vain  
against God taste so bitter, full of fear  
and hate and hidden things that disappear  
beneath a clouded surface and are gone  
from view, but still felt, and feared. With what strain  
we twist and turn ourselves year after year,  
trying to unfeel the pull, to unhear  
the call to waters that could heal all pain.  
They roll in, broad and clear, powerful and true,  
their crystalline secret revealed to all  
who humble themselves to enter that wild  
green chamber, elegant and fierce and mild,  
which carries us beyond ourselves and through,  
leading and inviting like a moving wall.

I X

W H Y   A N D   W H Y

Today she was born who gave birth to God;  
time wound and unwound in her sacred womb  
where she became what she was before, loom  
upon which eternity was woven. Guide  
me, Holy Mother, body of light, laud  
of angels; like a flower in your room  
turn my face toward your sun and make me bloom;  
let me stand one bright day loving and unflawed.  
So unlike you now, full of spite and rank  
impatience, I cry out like a child, loud  
and helpless, trying with the few words I  
have to let go of all in me that's proud,  
to ask of everything I do why and why,  
to say, with Peter, I walked before I sank.

X

POSSIBLE TO LEAP

The window of the soul is hard to keep  
clean; from inside and outside, far and near  
one must examine every smudge and smear  
to try to make the vision clear. It's a steep  
ascent that would feel like the sleepless sleep  
of Sisyphus, were it not for the dear  
promise of its end and the sweet hope, here  
and now, that it's still possible to leap.  
It's God's image in the glass, like seeing  
a world in front of you reflected from  
behind, but no less real, a world of light  
that children instinctively know is Being  
and pass freely into and turn to welcome  
any who look and see with their pure sight.

## NOTES

The following lines were borrowed from Abigail Brundin's translation of Vittoria Colonna's *Sonnets for Michelangelo* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Words in brackets were not included in *The Alchemy of Grace*. Page numbers from the Brundin translation are included in parentheses:

**Sonnet 3:** "worthless burdens of the world" (59).

**Sonnet 18:** "If the heavens gave up a [bright] shining light / to set fire to the earth so that it burns / for our salvation, what" (71).

**Sonnet 19:** "Your gift, Lord, is that a mortal being can attain / the infinite" (71).

**Sonnet 20:** "living branch on the broad vine of truth" (71).

**Sonnet 21:** "however much I distrust myself, so much more" (73).

**Sonnet 22:** "through cold and mist toward God's heat / and light, which melt away" (73).

**Sonnet 23:** "I wish that the true sun, upon which I" (75).

**Sonnet 26:** "I seem to see a woman of passion an spirit, / far from the errant crowd in her lonely dwelling" (77).

**Sonnet 28:** "if in such bright light and intense heat / we do not melt as soft wax or white snow" (79).

**Sonnet 29:** "O my soul, the Lord is coming, now chase away / the mists that surround you" (79).

**Sonnet 31:** "If the faint sound, which alone stirs and / moves the frail air" and "where the steady rhythm is never broken" (81).

**Sonnet 33:** "Francis, in whom as if in humble wax" (83).

**Sonnet 36:** "climb aboard the ark / with Noah" and "or else with Peter" (85).

**Sonnet 39:** "chose to come to earth in mortal form" and "took our human error as his own" (87).

**Sonnet 40:** "The first martyr kept his eyes fixed on God, / not only because his mind was pure and good" (87).

**Sonnet 44:** "At his birth, at his death, when he rose into heaven, / he found you [at] his side" (91).

**Sonnet 45:** "so full of the immensity of / his concept" and "came forth bit by bit" (93).

**Sonnet 49:** "The stable, the animals, the cold, and the hay, / and his poor rags, and his [hard] bed, / all were a sure sign of his celestial grace" (95).

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