

## Francesco Petrarca

[Petrarch](#) (1304-c. 1374) was an Italian poet and scholar. His muse was Laura de Noves, a married woman whom Petrarch first saw in Avignon in his youth. Scholars are not quite sure if he ever even talked to her, but we do know that he dedicated hundreds of poems to her.

She died of the plague—as did his son, grandson, and many friends.

Petrarch learned of her death in a letter he received from a friend in May of 1348.



Petrarch, portrait by Altichiero, c. 1370-80 (Wikipedia)

*Petrarch wrote the following in the margins of a manuscript of Virgil*

Laura, illustrious by her virtues, and long celebrated in my songs, first greeted my eyes in the days of my youth, the 6th of April, 1327, at Avignon; and in the same city, at the same hour of the same 6th of April, but in the year 1348, withdrew from life, while I was at Verona, unconscious of my loss. . . . Her chaste and lovely body was interred on the evening of the same day in the church of the Minorites: her soul, as I believe, returned to heaven, whence it came. To write these lines in bitter memory of this event, and in the place where they will most often meet my eyes, has in it something of a cruel sweetness, but I forget that nothing more ought in this life to please me.

*Petrarch wrote to his brother Gherardo , who lived in a monastery in Monrieux. His brother, the story goes, was the only survivor out of thirty-five people there, and had remained, alone with his dog, to guard and tend the monastery.*

My brother! My brother! My brother! A new beginning to a letter, though used by Marcus Tullius [Cicero] fourteen hundred years ago. Alas! my beloved brother, what shall I say? How shall I begin? Whither shall I turn? On all sides is sorrow; everywhere is fear. I would, my brother, that I had never been born, or, at least, had died before these times. How will posterity believe that there has been a time when without the lightnings of heaven or the fires of earth, without wars or other visible slaughter, not this or that part of the earth, but well-nigh the whole globe, has remained without inhabitants. When has any such thing been even heard or seen; in what annals has it ever been read that houses were left vacant, cities deserted, the country neglected, the fields too small for the dead and a fearful and universal solitude over the whole earth?... Oh happy people of the future, who have not known these miseries and perchance will class our testimony with the fables. We have, indeed, deserved these [punishments] and even greater; but our forefathers also have deserved them, and may our posterity not also merit the same.

*Petrarch also wrote to his friend Louis Sanctus (whom he fondly called "Socrates").*

If you wish to bemoan the fates of all mortal men, one breast and one tongue will not suffice for you. You have taken on an enormous, miserable, and irksome subject, useless, inexplicable. Tears must be sought from another source: Indeed, they are always springing up out of some recent and unending cause of sorrow, and the two eyes, already worn out, exhausted and dried up, can pour out only a little melancholy moisture. What therefore can you do to forget, except spread the poison, proffered as medicine, to your friends, not being content with your own misery and sickness, in which you keep knowing and wishing that you would fall? . . .

In the year 1348, one that I deplore, we were deprived not only of our friends but of peoples throughout all the world. If anyone escaped, the following year mowed down others, and whatever had been passed over by the storm, is then pursued by a deadly scythe. When will posterity believe this to have been a time in which nearly the whole world – not just this or that part of the earth – is bereft of inhabitants, without there having occurred a conflagration in the heavens or on land, without wars or other visible disasters? When at any time has such a thing been seen or spoken of? Has what happened in these years ever been read about: empty houses, derelict cities, ruined estates, fields strewn with cadavers, a horrible and vast solitude encompassing the whole world? Consult historians, they are silent; ask physicians, they are stupefied; seek the answer from philosophers, they shrug their shoulders, furrow their brows, and with fingers pressed against their lips, bid you be silent. Will posterity believe these things, when we who have seen it can scarcely believe it, thinking it a dream except that we are awake and see these things with our open eyes, and when we know that what we bemoan is absolutely true, as in a city fully lit by the torches of its funerals we head for home, finding our longed-for security in its emptiness? O happy people of the next generation, who will not know these miseries and most probably will reckon our testimony as a fable!

I do not deny that we deserve these misfortunes and even worse; but our forebears deserved them too, and may posterity not deserve them in turn. Therefore why is it, most Just of judges, why is it that the seething rage of Your vengeance has fallen so particularly hard upon our times? Why is it that in times when guilt was not lacking, the lessons of punishment were withheld? While all have sinned alike, we alone bear the lash. We alone, I say; for I hear it affirmed that compared to the number we receive at present, the lashes inflicted upon all men after that most famous ark [of Noah] had borne the remnants of humanity upon the formless sea would have been a delight, a joke, and a respite. Even when it behooves us to wage countless wars against these evils, in the course of which many kinds of remedies are tried, in the end it is not permitted to men to at least die with dignity. For it is a rare solace of death to die well. No remedy is exactly right, and there is no solace. And to the accumulated disaster is added not knowing the causes and origin of the evil. For neither ignorance nor even the plague itself is more hateful than the nonsense and tall tales of certain men, who profess to know everything but in fact know nothing. Nonetheless their mouths, although accustomed to ling, are in the end silent, and although at first impudence had opened them out of habit, at last they are closed by stupidity.

But I return to my inquiry: Whether for those making a long journey it happens that one part of the way is tiring, another easy. For so it is with us that Your forbearance, God, has slackened little by little toward human crimes, and under the heavy burden of Your yoke, the Omnipotent now must set down His provisions, and You, the best traveler, no longer able to support us, throws us onto Your back and in Your anger avert Your eyes of mercy from us. What if we are making atonement not just for our crimes, but also for those of our fathers, whether these be worse I do not know, but certainly they were more pitiable. Or could it be perhaps that certain great truths are to be held suspect, that God does not care for mortal men? But let us drive these foolish thoughts from our minds. If God did not care for us, there would be nothing left to sustain us. For who will provide these necessities for us, if they are not attributed to God, but to nature; what feeling will be left to us, why give ourselves over to the quest for truth? Since Seneca calls most ungrateful all those who neglect their duties to God, under a different name, are they not denying His due of heavenly majesty by impiously mocking Him? Surely You do care for us and our affairs, God. But there is some reason, hidden and unknown to us, why down through all the ages we, who are the most dignified of Your creatures, seem to be the ones most severely punished. Not that Your justice is less because it is concealed, for the depth of Your judgements is inscrutable and inaccessible to human senses. Therefore either we are truly the worst of all beings, which I would like to deny but dare not, or God is reserving us for some future good the more He is exercising and purging us from these present evils, or there is something there that we are altogether unable to conceive. In any case, whatever the reasons may be and however many are hidden from us, the results are most evident...

Where are our sweet friends now? Where are the beloved faces? Where are the agreeable words, where the soothing and pleasant conversation? What lightning bolt devoured them? What earthquake overturned them? What storm submerged them? What abyss swallowed them? Once we were all together, now we are quite alone. We should make new friends, but where or with whom, when the human race is nearly extinct, and it is predicted that the end of the world is soon at hand? We are—why pretend? —truly alone . . . You see that our great band of friends is reduced in number. And behold, even as we speak we too are drifting apart, and we vanish like shadows. And in the same moment that one hears that the other is gone, he is soon following in his footsteps. . . .

Never does it seem to me to be a sadder occasion than when one inquires with trepidation after a friend. How goes it? How is our friend doing? But as soon as he has heard you say “farewell,” he is filled with dread and very quickly his face is wet with tears. And indeed he—I cannot say this without shedding many tears, and I would shed many now when I say this, except that with all the evil events that have happened these eyes have become exhausted and I would rather save all the rest of my tears, if there are any left, for when they are needed – I say that he is suddenly seized by this pestilential disease, which is now ravaging the world, toward evening, after a dinner with friends and that at sundown he goes to bed, after having digested so much from our conversation in the remembrance of our friendship and our exploits together. He passes that night among his last sorrows in a greatly terrified frame of mind. But in the morning he succumbs to a quick death, and as if this misfortune were not enough, within three days, his sons and all his family follow him.

*Epsitolae Familiares* [*Familiar Letters*] (c.1351-53)