

Poems by Louise Labé

Translated by Annie Finch

SONNET I

Not even Ulysses, or someone as wise as he,
would guess that a face like yours—so full of grace
and honor and respect—such a divine face—
could bring suffering like the pain you're causing me.
Yes, Love, your eyes in all their piercing beauty
have stabbed my innocent breast in the same place
once nourished and kept warm in your embrace;
and still, you are my only remedy.

Hard destiny makes me act like one who's been
stung by a scorpion but still hopes to heal,
taking an antidote of the very same poison.
Wounded as I am, I'm asking you, and you alone—
please don't extinguish the burning you make me feel.
Losing this love's life would rob me of my own.

SONNET 7

We know this: everything that feels life move
dies, if the soul and body separate.
Now, I'm the body, and you are my own soul-mate.
So where have you gone to now, my life, my love?
Don't make me stay here soulless while you rove!
You'd come back too late to save my life! Don't wait!
This body of yours has reached a terrible state!
I need you now; I need how you move above
me. Come easily, so it's not dangerous
for us to meet again, all amorous;
don't be too hard on me, and I know you'll move
me to appreciate your grace. Restore
your beauty to me gently— so it will prove
gentle, although it was so cruel before.

SONNET II

Ah! The soft looks of your so beautiful eyes
are tiny gardens growing amorous flowers;
Love's dangerous arrows nestle in their bowers,
and my eye has been arrested by the prize.
Ah! Your violent heart is so rude and cruel: it lies,
and binds me with such unrelenting powers
that my tears pour down in oh, such langorous showers,
at the torture of my ripe heart's ardent cries!
My eyes, you have discovered such great pleasure,
so much good fortune in his two eyes' treasure—
but my heart, the more you see the eyes' condition,
the more you languish, the more you feel the pain.
Do you think that I feel easy, that I gain,
when I feel my eyes and my heart in opposition?

SONNET 23

What good is it, alas, how well you sang
long-ago praises to my golden hair
or said the beauty of my eyes compared
to gorgeous suns from which Love's arrows sprang
and caused your heart new torments with each pang?
Oh tears that dry so quickly in the air,
oh Death, on which you promised you would swear
your love—on which your solemn vows still hang—
or was the aim of your deceitful malice
to enslave me, pretending to be in my service?
For once, at least, oh love, please pardon me
this mixture of despair and wrath entwined;
but I feel sure, wherever you may be,
you endure your martyrdom as I do mine.

SONNET 24

Ladies, don't reproach me that I've felt
such love it makes a thousand torches burn,
a thousand cares, a thousand sorrows turn
my days to days that tears consume and melt.
Don't let your words cover my name with guilt,
since if I fail, I feel the pain I earn.
Don't sharpen the needles further; you will learn
how hot Love burns each time it is heartfelt,
even if there's no Vulcan for an excuse,
no beauty like Adonis's to accuse.
Love, at his whim, could make you burn more, until—
even with less occasion than I have—
you'd endure a stronger and a stranger love.
So watch out, or you'll be more unhappy still.

Annie Finch's books of poetry include *Calendars* (2003), shortlisted for the Foreword Poetry Book of the Year award; *Eve* (1997); and *The Encyclopedia of Scotland* (2004). These poems are from her translation of the *Complete Poems of Louise Labé*, forthcoming from University of Chicago Press. She has also written for music and opera collaboration and has edited and written a number of books on poetics including *An Exaltation of Forms: Contemporary Poets Celebrate the Diversity of Their Art* with Kathrine Varnes (2002), and *Lofly Dogmas: Poets on Poetry*, with Maxine Kumin and Deborah Brown (2006). Her collection of essays, *The Body of Poetry: Essays on Women, Form, and the Poetic Self* was published last year by the University of Michigan Press. She is Professor of English and Director of the Stonecoast Brief-Residency MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Southern Maine.

Louise Labé (c. 1520-66) was an important literary figure in the Renaissance world of Lyons, France, and earned the nickname "La Sappho Lyonnaise." She is known both for her book of poems published in 1555, which included 24 sonnets and three long elegies, and for many colorful legends about her life, her illustrious love affairs, and her skill at jousting.