We may wonder how Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564) came to poetry at all. Through his sculpture, we might say. He was fifteen when a carving of his caught the eye of Lorenzo de’ Medici, who was so impressed that he took the boy into his own home. During the two years spent at the palazzo of Lorenzo, who was himself a poet of distinction, Michelangelo must have heard much poetry and much talk of poetry. Somewhat later, when he was the guest of a nobleman in Bologna, he delighted his host by reading aloud, in his Tuscan accent, from the Italian poets. Dante he knew almost by heart. When he was about twenty-eight, already famous for his Pietà, his David, and other works, we are told that for a time he did nothing with brush or chisel, but instead devoted his time to reading poetry and writing sonnets for his own pleasure, turning to verse for what he could not express through sculpture or painting.

From his late twenties until he was nearly sixty, his life was a tumult of activity: quarrying stones in the mountains, harassed by conflicting commitments, busy for years with the famous ceiling and the Medici chapel, even supervising the fortifications of Florence in a time of crisis. From those decades, we have fewer than two poems a year, many, like most of his sculptures, unfinished. But in the fifteen years that followed, the period of his two great loves, his literary output almost quadrupled. He was fifty-seven when he met the handsome Roman aristocrat Tommaso de’ Cavalieri, then about twenty-three. For Tommaso some of Michelangelo’s greatest sonnets were written, expressing an ardor his Platonism justified by seeing in his friend a beauty beyond that of earth. The sonnets had grown less frequent when, a few years later, Michelangelo met Vittoria Colonna, widowed poet and marchesa, one of the most distinguished women of her time, honored by pope and emperor. Living much of the year in convents and devoted to church reform, Vittoria was not to be addressed with the sensuous fervor of the sonnets for Tommaso. Her role was to correct and fortify his own soul by her example and to direct his thoughts to the afterlife: he was beginning The Last Judgment about the time that he met her.

His sculpture and painting, rarely or never mentioned in earlier poetry, now become a source of imagery for such sonnets as the four translated here. In the more fanciful madrigal (241), he compares the artist’s development to the evolution of the universe: since the artist learns to do his best work (he says) only toward the close of his life, and since nature has at last produced supreme
beauty in the unnamed Vittoria, it must mean that the earth is near its end. When Vittoria died after a dozen years of friendship, there were no more love poems for man or woman, Michelangelo’s focus turning to a tormented but ardent colloquy with God.