IF NOT, WINTER

FRAGMENTS OF SAPPHO

TRANSLATED

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Sappho was a musician. Her poetry is *lyric*, that is, composed to be sung to the lyre. She addresses her lyre in one of her poems (fr. 118) and frequently mentions music, songs and singing. Ancient vase painters depict her with her instrument. Later writers ascribe to her three musical inventions: that of the *plectron*, an instrument for picking the lyre (*Suda*); that of the *pektis*, a particular kind of lyre (*Athenaios Deipnosophistai* 14.635b); and the mixolydian mode, an emotional mode also used by tragic poets, who learned it from Sappho (*Aristoxenos* cited by *Plutarch On Music* 16.113c). All Sappho's music is lost.

Sappho was also a poet. There is a fifth-century *hydria* in the National Museum of Athens that depicts Sappho, identified by name, reading from a papyrus. This is an ideal image; whether or not she herself was literate is unknown. But it seems likely that the words to her songs were written down during or soon after her lifetime and existed on papyrus rolls by the end of the fifth century B.C. On a papyrus roll the text is written in columns, without word division, punctuation or lineation. To read such a text is hard even when it comes to us in its entirety and most papyri don't. Of the nine books of lyrics that Sappho is said to have composed, one poem has survived complete. All the rest are fragments.

Sappho lived in the city of Mytilene on the island of Lesbos from about 630 B.C. It is not known when she died. Her exile to Sicily sometime between 604 and 595 B.C. is mentioned in an ancient inscription (the Parian Marble) but no reason for it is given. Biographical sources mention a mother, a father, a daughter, a husband and three brothers of Sappho. She appears to have devoted her life to composing songs; scholars in Alexandria collected them in nine books, of which the first book alone had 1320 lines. Most of this is lost. Her face was engraved on the coinage of Mytilene (see G. M. A. Richter, *Portraits of the Greeks*, I.70–72) and Hellenistic poets called her “the tenth Muse” or “the mortal Muse” (see *Palatine Anthology* 9.506 and 7.14). The general tenor of ancient opinion on her work is summarized by a remark of Strabo:
Sappho [is] an amazing thing. For we know in all of recorded history not one woman who can even come close to rivaling her in the grace of her poetry.

(13.2.3)

Controversies about her personal ethics and way of life have taken up a lot of people's time throughout the history of Sapphic scholarship. It seems that she knew and loved women as deeply as she did music. Can we leave the matter there? As Gertrude Stein says:

She ought to be a very happy woman. Now we are able to recognize a photograph. We are able to get what we want.

—“Marry Nettie,” *Gertrude Stein Writings 1903–1932* (New York, 1999), 461

**ON THE TEXT**

Breaks are always, and fatally, reinscribed in an old cloth that must continually, interminably be undone.


In general the text of this translation is based on *Sappho et Alcaeus: Fragmenta*, edited by Eva-Maria Voigt (Amsterdam, 1971). I include all the fragments printed by Voigt of which at least one word is legible; on occasion I have assumed variants or conjectures from her apparatus into my translation and these are discussed below (see Notes). In translating I tried to put down all that can be read of each poem in the plainest language I could find, using where possible the same order of words and thoughts as Sappho did. I like to think that, the more I stand out of the way, the more Sappho shows through. This is an amiable fantasy (transparency of self) within which most translators labor. If light appears not ruining the eyes (as Sappho says) but strengthening, nourishing and watering

—Aelius Aristides *Orations* 18.4

we undo a bit of the cloth.
ON MARKS AND LACKS

Sappho’s fragments are of two kinds: those preserved on papyrus and those derived from citation in ancient authors. When translating texts read from papyri, I have used a single square bracket to give an impression of missing matter, so that ] or [ indicates destroyed papyrus or the presence of letters not quite legible somewhere in the line. It is not the case that every gap or illegibility is specifically indicated: this would render the page a blizzard of marks and inhibit reading. Brackets are an aesthetic gesture toward the papyrological event rather than an accurate record of it. I have not used brackets in translating passages, phrases or words whose existence depends on citation by ancient authors, since these are intentionally incomplete. I emphasize the distinction between brackets and no brackets because it will affect your reading experience, if you allow it. Brackets are exciting. Even though you are approaching Sappho in translation, that is no reason you should miss the drama of trying to read a papyrus torn in half or riddled with holes or smaller than a postage stamp—brackets imply a free space of imaginal adventure.

A duller load of silence surrounds the bits of Sappho cited by ancient scholars, grammarians, metricians, etc., who want a dab of poetry to decorate some proposition of their own and so adduce *exempla* without context. For instance, the second-century-A.D. grammarian Apollonios Dyskolos, who composed a treatise *On Conjunctions* in which he wished to make a point about the spelling of the interrogative particle in different dialects of ancient Greek, cites from Sappho this verse:

> Do I still long for my virginity?
> —Apollonios Dyskolos *On Conjunctions* 490 = Sappho fr. 107 Voigt

Whose virginity? It would be nice to know whether this question comes from a wedding song (and so likely an impersonation of the voice of the bride) or not (and so possibly a personal remark of Sappho’s). Apollonios Dyskolos is not interested in such matters. Or consider the third-century-B.C. philosopher Chrysippos whose treatise *On Negatives* includes this negation from Sappho:

> Not one girl I think who looks on the light of the sun will ever have wisdom like this.
> —Chrysippos *On Negatives* 13 = Sappho fr. 56 Voigt
Wisdom like what? And who is this girl? And why is Sappho praising her? Chrysippus is not concerned with anything except Sappho’s sequence of negative adverbs. There is also the second-century-A.D. lexicographer Pollux whose lexicon includes the following entry:

A word beudos found in Sappho is the same as the word kimberikon which means a short transparent dress.

—Pollux 7.49 = Sappho fr. 177 Voigt

Who would not like to know more about this garment? But the curiosity of Pollux is strictly lexical. In translating such stranded verse I have sometimes manipulated its spacing on the page, to restore a hint of musicality or suggest syntactic motion. For example the sentence cited by Chrysippus becomes:

not one girl I think
  who looks on the light of the sun
    will ever
      have wisdom
        like this

This is a license undertaken in deference to a principle that Walter Benjamin calls “the intention toward language” of the original. He says

The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original. . . . Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one.

—W. Benjamin, “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,” originally a preface to Benjamin’s translation of Baudelaire (Heidelberg, 1923), 77

I am never quite sure how to hear Sappho’s echo but, now and again, reading these old citations, there is a tingle.

So far we have looked at examples of citation without context. Still more haunting are instances of context without citation. Some wonderful night of Sappho’s life, not to say the prayer that it evoked, survives only as an allusion of the fourth-century-A.D. orator Libanius:
So if nothing prevented the Lesbian Sappho from praying that her night be made twice as long, let it be permitted me too to pray for something like this.

—Libanius Orationes 12.99 = Sappho fr. 197 Voigt

Some song of Sappho's that Solon heard sung by a boy is mentioned in an anecdote of Stobaios but Stobaios omits to tell us what song it was:

Solon of Athens heard his nephew sing a song of Sappho's over the wine and since he liked the song so much he asked the boy to teach it to him. When someone asked why he said, So that I may learn it then die.

—Stobaios Florilegium 3.29.58

Some shrewd thinking of Sappho's about death is paraphrased by Aristotle:

Sappho says that to die is evil: so the gods judge. For they do not die.

—Aristotle Rhetoric 1398b = Sappho fr. 201 Voigt

As acts of deterrence these stories carry their own kind of thrill—at the inside edge where her words go missing, a sort of antipoem that condenses everything you ever wanted her to write—but they cannot be called texts of Sappho's and so they are not included in this translation.
Ποικίλουσιν ἀθανάτ’ Ἀφρόδιτα,  
παίζοντας δολιόπλοκο, Λύκομοις εἰς,  
μὴ μὲν ἄσχετος μηδεὶς ὀνύσις δάμνα,  
πότνια, θῶμον,  

ἀλλὰ τινὶ ἔλεος, ἀῤῥενότερα  
τὰς ἔμας κυδίδας ἀίωνια τῆλοι  
ἐκλυόμεθα, πάτροις δὲ δόμον λίποις  
χρόνιον ἡλικίας  

ἀρμῷ ὑπαξιοῦσαι κάλλος δὲ ἔ ἀγον  
ὡραεῖς ἐτρόμουθοι περὶ γὰς μελαίνας  
πῦρνα δίνεις τεθείς ἀπ’ ὁρῶν ἀθέοις  
дейτα διὰ μέσσων.  

ἀψα δ’ ἐξαίρετοι· εἴ δ’, ὅ μάκαρα,  
μείδιαίσας’ ἀθανάτωι προοίμωι  
ἡμέρῃ ὅτου δὴν τε πέσωῦ δέχετε  
δημοῦ νλάλημμι  

καὶ τίς μοι μάλιστα θέλω γένεσθαι  
μακαρόλαι θύμως· τίνα δὴντε πέιθω  
.μ.θάγην ἔς εἰς σὰν φιλοτατά· τίς ε’, ὅ  
Ψάμηρ’, ἱδίινης.
Deathless Aphrodite of the spangled mind, 
child of Zeus, who twists lures, I beg you 
do not break with hard pains, 
    O lady, my heart 

but come here if ever before 
you caught my voice far off 
and listening left your father’s 
golden house and came, 

yoking your car. And fine birds brought you, 
quick sparrows over the black earth 
whipping their wings down the sky 
    through midair— 

they arrived. But you, O blessed one, 
smiled in your deathless face 
and asked what (now again) I have suffered and why 
    (now again) I am calling out 

and what I want to happen most of all 
in my crazy heart. Whom should I persuade (now again) 
to lead you back into her love? Who, O 
    Sappho, is wronging you?
καὶ γὰρ αἱ ἡμέρες ταχέως διώξει,
αἱ δὲ δῶρα μὴ δέκεται, ἄλλα δώσει,
αἱ δὲ μὴ φίλει, ταχέως φιλήσει κωφὸ ἐθέλοισα.

ἐλήθε μοι καὶ νῦν, χαλέπαν δὲ λῦσον ἐκ μερίμναν, ὡς καὶ μοι τέλεσσαί θύμος ἱμέρρει, τέλεσον, κύριε, ἀπὸ αὐτὰ σύμμαχος ἔσσο.
For if she flees, soon she will pursue.
If she refuses gifts, rather will she give them.
If she does not love, soon she will love
   even unwilling.

Come to me now: loose me from hard
care and all my heart longs
to accomplish, accomplish. You
   be my ally.
[ανοθὲν κατιού[\]
δευτερομμενχρητεσι[\].φ[ ]]. ναῦν
ἀγνὸν ὀπτ[αι ]] χάριεν μὲν ἄλεος
μαλί[αν], βестествο δ᾽ ἐνι θυμίαμε—


ἐν δ᾽ ὑδῷ ψύχων, καλάδει δ᾽ ἔφεδων
μαλίνων, βρόδοις δὲ παῖς ὁ χῶρος
ἐκτίαζε, αἰθουσσομένων δὲ φύλλων
κώμα κατατριφον.

ἐν δὲ λείμων ἵπποβοτος τέθεαλε
τῶτ...(.χριννοις ἀνθεαίν, ιδί ὤθηται
μέλλιληχα πνεύολείσιν [ ]

ἐνθὰ δὴ ὦ ὑμ. ἑλοῖνα Κύπρι
χρουσίαις ἐν κυλίκεσσιν ἄβρως
ὀμμεμείχμενον θαλίασι! νέκταρ
οἶνοχόσια
here to me from Krete to this holy temple
where is your graceful grove
of apple trees and altars smoking
   with frankincense.

And in it cold water makes a clear sound through
apple branches and with roses the whole place
is shadowed and down from radiant-shaking leaves
   sleep comes dropping.

And in it a horse meadow has come into bloom
with spring flowers and breezes
like honey are blowing

   [               ]

In this place you Kypris taking up
in gold cups delicately
nectar mingled with festivities:
   pour.
δώσην
καὶ ὅτων μέν ἐπὶ καὶ ἄλων κάκλων, ὥσπερ οἶδοι, λύπης τέμον 
μὴ ὑνείδος
κοιδήσας ἐπιταχύνων, αὖ ὁ γὰρ ἐμὸν ὑποκύτων μὴ διάχυται,
μὴ γαίρει, ὅσιος, γυνήμη 
γαίρει, κακὸτατὸς
μὲν 
ἐν ἀτέροις μὲ ἐν 
η φρένας, εὖ 
ἐκ τοῖς μακαλὺ 

λα
to give
yet of the glorious
of the beautiful and good, you
    of pain [me
blame
swollen
you take your fill. For [my thinking
not thus
is arranged
nor
all night long] I am aware
    of evildoing
]
]
other
minds
blessed ones
]
ὁς θόμον
μι πάμπαν
δύναμαί,

ἀς κεν ὡ μοι
ἐκνυλάμπην
λον πρόσωπον.

ἡχοίθεις,

ἅς ἱς
heart
absolutely
I can
would be for me
to shine in answer
face
having been stained
Κύπριο καὶ] Νηρώ[ίδας, ἀβλάβη[ν μοι
tὸν κασίγην[τον δ[ότε το[ιδ' ἱκεθα[ι
κῶς[α F]οι θόμω[ν] κε θέλη γένεθαι
πάντα τελέσθην,

ο[ς[α δ[ὲ πρόκοθ' ἄμβροτε πάντα λύς[ι
καὶ φίλοις]: Φο[ῖα χάραξν γένεθαι

. . . . . ἔρχοροι, γένοτο δ' ἄμμι
. . . . . . μηδ' εἰς:

τὰν κασίγήν[ταν δ[ὲ θέλοι πόη[θαι

[τίμας, [θνί[αν δ[ὲ λύγαν
[τοι[ς[ι π[ά]ροι[θ' ἀρχεύων
[. να
[. εἰκαίω[ν] τὸ κέγχρο
[λεπαγ[.,(.')]αι πολίταν
[λλω[ς[.,.]νκε δ' αὐτ' οὐ
[ηρο[ ]
[να[κ[ .[νο[ ,ι
[. /[.]ν' οὗ [δ]' Κύπ[ρι[ .[.()]να
[θεμ[έν]α κάκαν [ ]
].
O Kypris and Nereids, undamaged I pray you 
grant my brother to arrive here. 
And all that in his heart he wants to be, 
make it be.

And all the wrong he did before, loose it. 
Make him a joy to his friends, 
a pain to his enemies and let there exist for us 
not one single further sorrow.

May he willingly give his sister 
hers portion of honor, but sad pain 
]grieving for the past 
] 
]millet seed 
]of the citizens 
]once again no 
] 
] 
]but you Kypris 
]setting aside evil [ 
]
6

"ώς δα. [
κακκι[

ατμι[
κτα. []
.][
θα[

Στείχ[
"ώς ἰδω[;
τὰς ἔτ.[

ποτνια.[

χοιροπ[;
καππο[;
.αμ[;
κάρα.[
].[}
Go so we may see lady of gold arms doom
Δωρίζας [. . . . .].

καν νέον, ού γὰρ ι

καὶ

καλὴν ἀγαφαῖς

μεν ὅσον νέοις

αν φιλάς [. . . . .].

μα. [}
Doricha’s
gives orders, for not

top pride
like young men
beloved
\], ν φ [ \\
]χμφ [ \\
]Λτθι ζο [ \\
]νέφ [ \\
] [ \\
}
At this for you

8

] } ]

] { } [ ] [ ]
ἀρκαλειοιταῖς,
πᾶν οὐκεχῆν
ἐρ ἔορταν
μὰν ["Η"]ϊαὶ τελεῖ
. ὁνέμ[.
. ἀς α.[
]υσαι[
]οςδε[.
]ν.[}
invites
all not
feast
for Hera
as long as


]...[  
\zeta \theta \varepsilon . [  
] [  
\gamma \nu \eta \mu  
]. \alpha \pi \epsilon \delta  
']. \eta \nu \varepsilon \omicron [  
] [  
].. \varphi [  
]. \psi [  
}
Οἱ μὲν ἵππην εὐρώτον, οἱ δὲ πέσδων,
οἱ δὲ νάων φαίνεται ἐπί τὰ γὰν μέλαν ἑμεναι κάλλιστον, ἡμω δὲ κὴν ὁτ–
τω τις ἐραται

πάλγγα δ᾿ εὑμαρεῖς εὐνετον πόνησαι
πλαντὶ τὸν ἔτι, ἀ γὰρ πόλυ περικεθήσα
χάλλος ἄνθρακων Ἕλενα τὸν ἄνδρα
τὸν [ αριστοτὸν

καλλίποις ἐβάς ὃς Τροίαν πλέοις
κωμῆλε παιδίος οὐδὲ φίλων τὸν ἡμῶν
πάμπαν ἐμνάςθη, ἀλλὰ παράγαγῃ αὐτὸν

)σαν

]αμπτον γὰρ [
]

...κούρωστι[ ὁη...γυ
]

...με νῦν Ἀνακτορίας ὁγέμναι
ς οὐ] παρεοίκας,
Some men say an army of horse and some men say an army on foot
and some men say an army of ships is the most beautiful thing
on the black earth. But I say it is
what you love.

Easy to make this understood by all.
For she who overcame everyone
in beauty (Helen)
    left her fine husband

behind and went sailing to Troy.
Not for her children nor her dear parents
had she a thought, no—
]led her astray

]for
]lightly
]reminded me now of Anaktoria
who is gone.
τὰς ϊπερ βολλοίμαν ἑφατόν τε βὰμα
καμάρυχμα λάμπρον ἤδην προσώπω
ἡ τὰ Λύδων ἄρματα καν ὁπλοῖς
πεσον ἄχεντας.

]. μεν οὐ δύνατον γένεσθαι
]. ν ἀνθρωπ[. (. ) πεδέχην δ’ ἄρασθαι
[ ]
[ ]
[ ]
[ ]
[ ]
[ ]

προς[ 

ὡς δ[ 

]. [. ]ωλ [. 

tε ἔξ ἀδοκή|τω.
I would rather see her lovely step
and the motion of light on her face
than chariots of Lydians or ranks
of footsoldiers in arms.

not possible to happen
toward
out of the unexpected.
Πλάσιον δὴ μή.
Πότνιε Ἡρα ἡ ἐλ σὲ χί.
τὰν ἄφατων Ἁτ[φάειδαι κλη]—
tοι βασίλησες.

ἐκτελέσσαντες μὴ
πρῶτα μὲν περὶ.
tυίδ᾽ ἀπομάθεντες
οὐκ ἐδύναντο

πρὶν εὖ καὶ Δί᾽ ἀντὶ
καὶ Θυώνας ἰμὲν.
vὸν δὲ καὶ
κατ τὸ παλὶ.

ἄγνα καὶ καὶ
πὰρθενὲν
ἀ]μφι. [ ]

[ ]
[.], νιλ[ ]
ἐμμενα[;]
[?]<(‘) ἀπίκ[ες]θωμ.

30
Close to me now as I pray,
lady Hera, may your gracious form appear,
to which the sons of Atreus prayed,
       glorious kings.

They won very many prizes
first at Troy then on the sea
and set out for here but
       could not complete the road

until they called on you and Zeus of suppliants
and Thyone’s lovely child.
Now be gentle and help me too
       as of old[

Holy and beautiful
maiden
around[

]
Πάν νεό
νυνέπην
γλώσσα μου
μυθολογία
κάνδριν
μεσδον
Pan
to tell[
tongue[
    to tell tales[

and for a man
greater[
μενοιςακα
θε ἐν θάοιςι
ἐχοιαν ἔειλ

ἐι δὲ βασιςα

γὰρ ἴδουν

ἐν ἔργων

δ᾽ ὑπίσσω

καὶπειδι

τοδ᾽ εἰπη
] waiting
] in sacrifices
] having good
] but going
] for we know
] of works
] after
] and toward
] says this
ἐπι ἔσμα[]
ἐ, γάνος δὲ καὶ . []
]
τὸ χαί εὖν ἐσελαι
λίμενος κρήτηςαι
gᾶς μελαίνας]
]
ἐλοις ναῦται]
μεγάλαις ἀήταις]
καὶ χέροςω]
μοθὲν πλέοι.
δε τὰ φόρτι εἰκ]
νατημ' ἐπέι κ.
]
ὁσοντι πόλλι.
αιδέκα]
ἐи]
]
ἐν ἔργα]
χέροςω]
, χ.
]
]
]..[}

36
20

] gladness and
] with good luck
] to gain the harbor
] of black earth
] sailors
] in big blasts of wind
] upon dry land
] sail
] the freight
] when
] many
] }
] works
] dry land
] }
ταν ἰόκολπον

广大群众 μάλιστα

ας π[λ]άναται
pity

trembling

flesh by now old age
covers
flies in pursuit

noble
taking
sing to us

the one with violets in her lap

mostly
goes astray
ἀρωτος ἡλπ[...

αντιον εἰς[δως[...

Ἐρμύνα τεσω[τα...

ξάνθαι δ᾽ Ἐλέναι ε´ εἰς[χ]ην...

κες...

κ.θ. θνάταις, τόδε δ᾽ ἦ[θ]ι, τὰὶ εὰν...

παίσαν κε με τὰν μερίμμαν...

λαὶς ἀντιδ[.,]´[.]´[.]χθοις δὲ...

τας ὅχθοις...

tαιν...

παν[νυχίς[δ]ην...

[...
of desire

for when I look at you

such a Hermione

and to yellowhaired Helen I liken you

among mortal women, know this

from every care

you could release me

dewy riverbanks
to last all night long
24A

|ανάγγ||
|]εμνάσεςθ' αλ|  
κλαί γὰρ ἡμεῖς ἐν νεότατι
ταῦτα ἐπόημεν·

πόλλα μὲν γὰρ καὶ κάλα . . . ημεν, πολί|  
μεταξὺ, λο[.]είας δ[  
.]. [.]. [.]

24C

|νθα|  
|ζ]ώομεν|  
|ω· ν. [.][  
]εναντ[  
]απάππ[  
]όλμαν[  
]ανθρω[  
]ονέχ[  
]παίς[  
}
you will remember
for we in our youth
    did these things

yes many and beautiful things

we live
the opposite
daring
24ο

], έδαφος[
]σικάτα[
]ανέλογ[
]
], [ ], αι
λεπτοφών[
], εκ, [
in a thin voice
Φαίνεται μοι κήνος ἵςος θέοιςιν ἐμμεν ὄνηρ, ὅτες ἐνάντιος τοι ἱσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδυ φωνεῖ- 
εις ὑπακούει

καὶ γελαίεις ἰμέροει, τὸ μί ἢ μᾶν 
καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόκεισιν

ὡς γὰρ ἢς ἢ ἰδω βρόχε ὡς με φώνη-

§ οὐδὲν ἦ τι εἶχει,

ἀλλὰ καὶ μὲν γλῶσσα ἔχει, λέπτον 
δὲ ἀυτίκα χαϊ πῶ ὑπαδεδρόμοσιν,

ὅππατεσσι δὲ οὐδὲν ὄρημί, ἐπιβρό-

μεισὶ δὲ ἄκουαι,

ἐκαθε μί ἢς ὁς κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ 
παῖσαν ἄγοει, χλωροτείρα δὲ πιοίας 
ἐμμί, τεθλάκην δὲ ὀλίγων ἱπδελύς 
φανινοὶ ἐμί αὐτίκα.

ἀλλὰ πὰν τόλματον, ἐπεῖ καὶ πένητα
He seems to me equal to gods that man
whoever he is who opposite you
sits and listens close
to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing—oh it
puts the heart in my chest on wings
for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking
is left in me

no: tongue breaks and thin
fire is racing under skin
and in eyes no sight and drumming
fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking
grips me all, greener than grass
I am and dead—or almost
I seem to me.

But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty