

SAPPHO | fragments



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translation | PETER ARCESE

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A new translation into English syllabic verse
by Peter Arcese

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1

Throned in splendor, deathless Aphrodite, come—
crafty daughter of Zeus, I beg you: don't leave
me here to suffer alone, overwhelmed with
a pained, aching heart,

but come to me now—once more—as you came in
the past, when you heard my voice calling from so
far away—when you left your father's sun-drenched
halls in your carriage,

drawn by sparrows, swiftly bringing you down with
fluttering wing-beats, beautiful birds escorting
you through air, descending from the heavens to
the dark earth, for me—

and you—blessed one—you looked me in the face,
and smiled your deathless smile, and asked what was wrong
with me this time, that I should call you here, so
urgently again—

what did my heart crave so badly, or rather:
whom? “Who is it now, Sappho?—which one am I to
lead back to you in love this time?—which one has
broken your heart now?

“Because if she runs away, she'll turn around
and chase—and if she won't take gifts, she'll offer
them instead—if she won't make love with you, we'll
drag her to your bed.”

So, come to me now and free me from this ache—
Still the madness in my mind by appeasing
my heart—satisfy my longing, and fight with
me to make her mine.

2

Some say soldiers on horseback, but others say
soldiers on foot, while some say ships are the most
beautiful sight on the black earth—but I say
it is your lover.

This can easily be understood: just think
of gorgeous Helen—the most stunning beauty
humankind has ever seen—she abandoned
her noble husband,

her only child, and dear parents, forgetting them
all to sail off for Troy, led lightly along
by nothing but love alone—farther away
and further astray—

—and then I remember Anactoria,
absent from us now, and I think of how
I long to watch her lovely step again—and
how one brief glimpse of

her shimmering eyes could stir me more deeply
than the sight of all the glimmering armor
in Lydia—

—out of reach—
—humanity—may there be some—
—of a sudden—

31

That man is lucky as a god to sit there
facing you, hearing your sweet voice drop softly
to his ear, listening to your bright laughter—
my heart can't take it!

Just seeing you for a second smothers my
voice, my tongue succumbs, a thin, creeping fire
spreads beneath my skin—my eyes unfocus, blur,
and I see nothing—

there's a loud ringing in my ears and sweat drips
down my spine—then I start to shake all over—
I turn paler than parched green grass, and I feel
like I am dying.

But it can all be suffered, since—even the poor one—

34

Stars go into hiding, draping their shining,
shapely figures when they draw near the silver
of the resplendent moon, as she bathes the earth
in her flush fullness—

36

longing—I'm craving more

37

my anguish—drips

47

Love rustled through me—shaking
my heart like a wind shivering through the tall mountain oaks.

48

You came to me when I wanted you—
you took my heart, cooling its blazing, its burning—for you.

49

A long time ago, Atthis, I was so in love with you.
To me, you were like a tender child, gawkish and awkward.

51

I can't decide, don't know what to do—my mind's spilt in two.

57

That girl from the suburbs has bewitched you—
look at those clothes!—straight off a rack at the
mall—and can't she even get those rags hemmed up over her ankles?

—if only I were really dead.
Leaving me with tears, she gave me this goodbye:

“Why?—why do we have to be so
unhappy? I don’t want to leave
you, Sappho.” And I answered her, just like this:

“Go now, but don’t forget me—you
know how we loved and nurtured you.
Or must I remind you once more of all

the wonderful times we had—how
we wrapped violets, roses, and
crocuses into chains of endless wreaths—with

you close by my side—and around
your delicate neck you hung
the garlands, woven between our hands with

the flowers that we picked. And with
the perfumed blossoms—a fragrance
for a queen—you touched, anointing yourself—

and on soft, supple beds, then you
would satisfy tender yearning—

—there was no holy place which we
had not attended—no grove—or dance—
or music—”

—Sardis—

her mind always running there with thoughts of

you—glorifying you—making you into
a goddess for all to see, and
worship with eyes—for all to hear and delight

in the song of your lovely voice. But now she
shines in Lydia—lovelier
than all their women. Just like the pale-rose moon

rising with the sunset, more exquisite than
the stars, her light bathes the salt sea
and blankets the blossoming meadows—moistened with

dew, exuded in beauty, the roses bloom—
fragile chervil shoots, and teeming
buds of mellilot—

Many times, between a step from here to there,
she will remember, you, gentle Atthis—
and thinking of your fate, her reminiscing

becomes an aching, eating at her heart—sent
away there—

102

Sweet mother, I can't keep weaving—slender Aphrodite has
twisted my fingers in the wool with desire for that boy.

105

The sweetest apple blushes high up on the tip of the topmost branch—the apple-pickers didn't spot it. No, its not that they couldn't see it, or they overlooked it—they just couldn't reach it.

113

For the bridegroom, she is the only girl in the world—

“Innocence—lost innocence, you’ve gone?—you’ve slipped away from me?”
“You’ll never see me again—I won’t ever come back to you.”

118

Come here, heavenly lyre—let yourself
sing to me when I pluck your strings—

130

I'm throbbing again—Love has turned my arms and legs to rubber-bands—the sly, bitter-sweet thing.

132

My beautiful daughter Kleis shines in my eyes like the
brightest golden flower—my darling girl, for whom I would
not trade all the loveliness in Lydia—

146

For me—leave off the honey, leave the bee—

147

Many years from now, there will be one to remember us—

153

There's sugar in that girl's voice—

158

Don't bark out stupid remarks—beware of a sharp tongue when anger uncoils in your chest.

168B

So late, the moon has already
set—and the Pleiades, gone too.
Midnight, I'm lying here alone—
hour after hour goes by.

172

—misery-monger—

185

—honey-toned voice—

About the translator

Peter Arcese teaches Humanities at New York University. He has translated the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus into English syllabic verse. His poetry and translations have appeared in *The New York Quarterly*.