

But if you, Lynceus, have any care for your pious sister,
 if you are worthy of the gift I gave,
 either save me or deliver me to death, place my body
 on a secret pyre, deprived of its life.
 Bury my bones wet with faithful tears and have my sepulcher
 engraved with a brief epitaph:
 "Here lies exiled Hypermestra, unjust the price paid for piety.
 The death she kept from her brother, she bore herself."
 I want to write more, but my hand slips under chains' weight,
 and terror has sapped all my strength.

130

HEROIDES XV: SAPPHO TO PHAON

Sappho, the historical poet from the island of Lesbos, writes to Phaon, a young man and her former lover.

So, did you recognize my diligent hand
 as soon as your eyes fell on this page?
 Or if you hadn't read the author's name—Sappho—
 would you not have known whose work this is?
 Perhaps you're curious about these elegiac lines,
 since my métier is lyric verse.
 My love needs tears: an elegy is a poem that weeps.
 No lyre will do for the tears I must shed.

I am on fire like wheat burning in a field
 fanned by a wild oriental wind.
 The fields Phaon haunts are near Typhoean Aetna's
 volcanic fire: my heat is no less.
 My lyre's strings are tuned, but the songs won't come:
 songwriting's work for a carefree mind.
 The girls of Pyrrha, girls of Methymna? No, thanks.
 None of that Lesbian crowd for me.
 Anactoria? Cheap. Ditto pale Cydro. And Arthis,
 my ex? I want her out of my sight,
 along with the hundred others I loved. You now possess
 what once belonged to a bevy of girls.

10

20

You have a face, and you're at the right age for love-play.
 (O your face caught me looking all right).
 Grab a lyre and quiver, you could pass for Apollo,
 sprout horns on your head, presto, you're Bacchus.
 But Apollo loved Daphne, and Bacchus Ariadne,
 and neither girl knew how to tune a lyre.
 Yet Pegasus's daughters recite to me the sweetest poems.
 Now my name is sung through all the world.

No less famous than my compatriot Alcaeus,
although his lyrics are more formal than mine.

30

If spiteful Nature has denied beauty to me,
balance my genius against my looks.
I may be short, but my reputation extends
to every land: this is my stature.
I am not fair-complexioned. Well, Perseus loved
Andromeda, a girl as dark as Africa.
White doves often mate with various colors,
parrots green love black turtle doves.
If you'll love no one except your match in beauty,
there's no one you'll love, no one at all.

40

But I seemed beautiful enough when I read you my poems;
you swore that I was poetry itself.
I remember singing (lovers remember everything)
and you stealing kisses while I sang.
These too you praised—I pleased you in every way,
but especially when it came to sex.
My love-play was more fun than was usual for you,
my pulsing gyrations and teasing talk,
and when we rolled all our sweetness up into one ball—
the deep languor of your exhausted limbs.

50

And now the girls of Sicily will become
fresh meat for you. What's Lesbos to me?
I want to be Sicilian too! Send my roamer
back from your land, Nisaeen ladies.
Nisaeen mothers, Nisaeen daughters, beware!
He'll tell you the same sweet lies he told me.
And you, Erycina, Sicanian mountain goddess,
I am yours: O protect your poet!

The tenor of my life has been bitter from birth.
Will my luck never change?
I was six years old when my father's bones
were soaked by my tears. He was too young to die.

60

My good-for-nothing brother fell for a whore
and lost everything at once: money, good name.
Now he swings an oar at sea, no more reputable
recovering his wealth than he was losing it.
He hates me because I kept warning him about this.
So much for candor, for sisterly advice.
And as if all this weren't enough to wear me out,
I have a young daughter to top off my worries.
And finally you, the last word in my litany of complaints.
My ship isn't sailing with a wind of its own.

70

Just look at me: hair scraggly on my neck,
no gems on my fingers, my clothes cheap rags,
no golden coiffure, no Arabian perfume.
Why bother to keep myself up?
For whom? You are the only reason
for me to look nice, and you're gone!

I have a tender heart, and I'm vulnerable.
There's always a reason for me to be in love.
Maybe the Sisters pronounced my fate at my birth:
No stern threads in the fabric of my life.
Or maybe your interests become your character,
and my muse Thalia is making me soft inside.

80

But it's no wonder his peach fuzz blew me away:
a guy could fall for a boy that age.
I used to be afraid, O dawn goddess Aurora,
that you would steal him from me,
trade in your Cephalus—and you would—
but your first prey must have a hold on you still.
If Phoebe, the Moon, who sees all, saw Phaon,
it would be Phaon ordered to sleep forever.
Venus would whisk him to heaven in her ivory car,
but sees he could please her own darling Mars.
Not yet a man but no longer a boy, a useful age,
glory of your generation, paradigm of your time,

90

glide back to my arms, O beautiful,
not to love but to let yourself be loved.

I write this, and tears well up like dew in my eyes.
Look at all the stains on this page!

100

If you were so fixed on leaving me,
you could have at least left with more grace.
All you had to say was, "Goodbye, Lesbian girl."
No tears, no kisses, no premonition of loss.

I have nothing of you except the wrong you did me,
and you have no token of your lover.

I gave you no parting words, nor would I have given you any
except perhaps that you not forget me.

I swear to you by our love (may it never disappear!)

110

and by the Nine Muses who are my gods,
when someone (I don't remember who) told me, "He's left you,"
for a long time I could not cry or speak.

My eyes wouldn't form tears, words wouldn't form in my mouth,
and my chest was a knot of frozen pain.

Then my grief found itself, and I wasn't ashamed
to beat my breast, tear my hair out and wail,

as if I were a mother carrying the corpse
of her beloved son to the funeral pyre.

Charaxus, my brother, just loved it, got fat
on my sorrow, paraded before me,

120

saying out loud, to make my grief seem shameful:

"Why is she so sad? Is her daughter dead?"

Modesty and love don't come to the same thing.

The whole world saw my torn, naked breast.

You're all I care about, Phaon. My dreams bring you back,
dreams brighter than beautiful daylight.

I find you there though you are gone from these parts.

But sleep can't bring joy that lasts long enough.

In my fantasies I press my neck

into your arms, or yours into mine,

130

feel the deep tongue kisses you used to give
and receive, the soft caresses, the words—
I actually speak the words—it all seems so real,
my lips are real, all my senses alert.
I'm embarrassed to say more, but it all happens,
and it feels so good, and I can't stay dry.

Then the sun reveals itself and everything else,

I complain that sleep has left me so soon.

I head for the woods, the caves, as if these could help,
woods and caves that know my secret pleasures.

140

And there I run like a woman possessed,
hair fanning out along my neck.

The caves are scaly with volcanic rock: they seem
to my eyes like Mygdonian marble.

I find the forest that used to bed us down,
the dark forest whose leaves covered us,
but I do not find my lord of the forest.

The place is cheap ground: he gives it its worth.

But I recognized where the grass was pressed down,
the familiar sod hollowed by our weight,
and I nestled in the spot where you once lay.

150

The grass, still gracious, sopped up my tears.

The bare ruined branches seem also to lament,
and the sweet birds sing no more their complaint.

Only the nightingale sings of her murdered son,
the son she killed to punish her husband.

The nightingale sings of Itys, Sappho of lost love.

The rest is silence, the silence of midnight.

There is a bright, sacred spring clearer than crystal—

many think a spirit possesses the water—

and above it, a lotus spreads its branches,

160

a single tree grown to a grove,

and the earth is green with tender turf.

Exhausted from weeping, I lay there to rest

when a Naiad appeared before my eyes,
 stood there and said: "Unrequited love?
 You must go to Ambracia. Apollo on high
 looks down from the headlands on the sea that is known
 as Actian and Leucadian. Deucalion, smoldering
 with love for Pyrrha, threw himself off there, 170
 and hit the water with body unharmed. Submerged,
 the passion drained from his chest,
 and Deucalion was relieved of his igneous love.
 It is a reliable local phenomenon.
 Hurry up, then, to the Leucadian cliff,
 and don't be afraid to dive from the rock."

Voice and image faded together. I rose, terrified,
 my eyes and cheeks still flooded with tears.
 I'll go. Nymph, I'll find that rock, fear subdued
 and banished by maddening passion. 180
 Anything will be better than this. Breeze, support me,
 bear my body lightly, and you, soft Eros,
 feather me as I fall, lest I die and become
 a blot to the honor of the Leucadian Sea.
 Then I'll dedicate to Apollo our common lyre
 and under it there will be a line or two:

"Sappho the poet to Apollo, *ex votis*:
 the lyre that is my trademark and yours."

But why do you send me to the shores of Actium
 when you could yourself retrace your steps? 190
 You would be better for me than the Leucadian surf,
 be my Apollo in kindness and looks.
 Or could you bear, if I die, to be labeled my murderer,
 crueller than any rock or sea?
 How much better for my breast to be pressed against yours
 than plunged upon precipitous rocks!
 The very breast, Phaon, that you used to praise,
 that seemed so often to breathe with genius.

I wish I were eloquent now. Grief stops my art,
 my genius is immobile with misery. 200
 My old poetic power won't answer the call,
 my plectrum and lyre lie mute with sorrow.

Lesbian islanders, married, engaged,
 Lesbians cataloged on my Aeolian lyre,
 Lesbians loved to my disgrace:
 crowd around to hear my zither no more.
 Phaon ("My Phaon," I almost said)
 has stolen away all that you loved.
 Bring him back, and you'll have your poet back too:
 he powers my genius and takes it away. 210
 Is his heart moved by my prayers, or is it frozen?
 Do the winds bear off my words as they fall?
 I wish they bore back your sails. If you had any feeling
 you wouldn't take so long to do what is right.

If you are preparing now to consecrate your craft,
 why tear my heart with delay? Untie the hawser!
 Seaborn Venus protects lovers at sea. Just untie the hawser!
 The wind will keep you on course.
 Cupid himself will pilot your ship, sitting on the stern,
 his tender hand will spread and furl sail. 220

But if it is pleasant to have flown far from Pelasgian Sappho
 even though I don't deserve to be shunned,
 at least let a cruel letter inform me of this,
 so I can seek my end in Leucadian waters.