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English 201

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*This piece is a reframing of the ancient Greek poet Sappho's most famous entreaty to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of Love and Beauty. The translation referred to in this piece is entitled "Deathless Aphrodite of the Spangled Mind," which is taken from the poem's first line. This piece is my interpretation of the poem, as Sappho's prayer to Aphrodite—but from Aphrodite's perspective. Sappho, as referred to in this piece, is a representation of the lyrical and narrative voice in the original poem.

A Prayer Heard on the Diarizos

Pomegranate seeds¹ littered the ground of the Diarizos River² bank. Newborn doves³ began to sing their first song from nests high in the pine branches. The flowers of the myrtle bushes⁴ have fully bloomed, their fragrance intermingled with the trees and rushing water. The afternoon sunlight danced as it met the earth.

Lying on her side, head propped on an elbow, Aphrodite made a delicate indentation in the lush grasses. She spooned fruit covered seeds onto her tongue and sucked on the sweet flavor. Her hair flowed much like the waters she lay in front of, draped down the curve of her neck. The wind blew the tops of the pine trees, letting a few beams of light pass through the canopy. The sun glimpsed into the river bank, peeking at the love goddess. The quiet light brought the pearls⁵ strewn in Aphrodite's hair to life. She lay naked and warm, yet every so often a chill would pucker the skin on her breasts. She had spooned the last few seeds into her mouth when her attention was brought to Sappho.

Poor Sappho of Lesbos, always luring pretty women to her love, only to fall for them as they leave, thought the goddess about a tale she had seen—and possibly caused—so many times before. Aphrodite could see Sappho on marble steps, her head buried in her arms, near weeping. Aphrodite wondered what, this time, may have caused her to shed these tears so reluctantly.

“Oh beautiful Aphrodite, please, let her stay.” Tears began to fall, wetting the marble steps beneath the heartbroken Sappho. Her hands lay flat and wide, palms facing the heavens.

The splash of a small river fish almost missed Aphrodite’s arm, a few small droplets landed on her wrist. She brushed them off with no more thought than slight annoyance.

“Can you hear me Aphrodite? Up there in your father’s golden house? Do you hear the pain in my cries? The desperate sorrow in my weeping?” Sappho looked up to see two large clouds overlapping each other. “Let the clouds part for the grand entry of my goddess. Come down Aphrodite, led by sparrows yoked onto your golden chariot, and release me from my anguish.”

I do not weep with you. You do not woo me as you have with so many earthly women with compliment and cajolery. So spare me, please Sappho, from your cries. The Goddess of Love now sat on the bank, empty pomegranate shell to her side. Her feet close enough to the water so it would just lick her toes with every pulse of the Diarizos.

The dark-haired lover sat on the marmoreal steps, with a slightly more devious look, yet just as desperate. “I pray for you to come down. Smile at me in your deathless face, Aphrodite, ask me of my suffering, ask me why I have called on you.”

The immortal symbol of love smiled. Leaning forward toward the clear water, Aphrodite gazed at her glistening reflection, in awe of her own beauty. Just as the pearls gleamed in her strawberry hair, her eyes shone like dazzling sunlit waters. The feminine curves of her

décolletage were enveloped in dewy milk white skin. Another splash from a small school caused her reflection to ripple, so she turned her gaze away.

“Aphrodite!” she stood now, beginning to walk up the marble steps, speaking with dangerous passion. “I know I have asked you again and again, but now what I want most of all in my crazy heart, is for you to ask me ...” Sappho leaned against a wall, picking at the leaves of the myrtle bush.

Giggling, Aphrodite stood. She walked, letting her feet make small splashes. *A mortal, even Sappho, begs me for a favor.* She fingered the ends of her hair. The ends would brush against her skin, pleurably tickling her most sensitive areas. Her body now chilled from walking in the river, she stepped onto a soft warm mossy spot under a young pine. *What is it you want Sappho?*

“...ask of her, the one you can persuade back into my love. I beg.”

The fickle-hearted beauty thought of the games she had played with the hearts of men. How easily their hearts could be moved, how easily they could be broken.

Who, O Sappho, is wronging you? She thought as she plucked a white flower from the myrtle, sniffing the center and placing it amongst the pearls in her hair. *Who, this time, do you think I am leading away from you?*

“This woman, the one who holds my heart, used to come to my call so willingly, now all she does is flee. O Aphrodite, won’t you persuade her to come back to my love.” Sappho turned, leaning on the chest-high marble wall, looking out at the city. “My maiden, she would receive my gifts with open arms. But now she turns away from me. Cast your spell, goddess, so that she may be the giver.” Sighing, Sappho turned her gaze away from Lesbos.

You ask so much of me, dear Sappho.

Sappho slid down the wall and slumped back into a seat, “I want her to love me. I need her to love me. I would take her love even if she did not mean it, even unwilling.”

I could so easily bring her back into your graces. Aphrodite found a spot where the sun reached the grass and sat, feeling the warm glow on her buttocks. *But you see, Sappho, you will fall again and again, in and out of love with beauty and women, so this time may be no different from all the other times before and after.*

Sappho stared at the fountain in front of her, “How spangled is your mind, won’t you come to me now Aphrodite, relieve me from my hard pains, I beg you to give me all my heart longs.” She stood slowly, walking toward the fountain. Carefully, she dipped her hand into the cold water. “Be my ally. Together we can accomplish.”

I can promise no alliance, nor am I your enemy. Go Sappho, and turn your feeble pains to beauty. She had wandered the forest, and now the earth had worn her out. The goddess Aphrodite listened to one more song from the high-footed doves before retreating back to her home.

Notes

- 1** In Greek mythology, pomegranate seeds are a symbol of fertility, beauty, and eternal life.
- 2** Many mythological sources say that Aphrodite was born, fully grown, from the sea on the coast of Paphos, a city on the Greek island Cyprus. The Diarizos river flows through Paphos and into the sea.
- 3** Often associated with love, doves were sacred to Aphrodite. Some say that doves pulled her chariot. However, in this translation of the poem, it is sparrows that are flying the chariot.
- 4** The myrtle tree or bush, especially its flower, is commonly associated with Aphrodite.

5 It is stated in some Greek stories that Aphrodite was born naked with only a string of pearls around her neck. She is often depicted with pearls.

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