

## Sappho, a translation by William Carlos Williams

### SAPPHO

A TRANSLATION BY WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

That man is peer of the gods, who face to face sits listening to your sweet speech and lovely laughter.

It is this that rouses a tumult in my breast. At mere sight of you my voice falters, my tongue is broken.

Straightway, a delicate fire runs in my limbs; my eyes are blinded and my ears thunder.

Sweat pours out: a trembling hunts me down. I grow paler than grass and lack little of dying.

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Pt 1 of 2

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A Translation by William Carlos Williams

"I'm 73 years old. I've gone on living as I could as a doctor and writing poetry on the side. I practised to get money to live as I please, and what pleases me is to write poetry.

"I don't speak English, but the American idiom. I don't know how to write anything else, and I refuse to learn. I'm writing and planning something all the time. I have nothing to do—a retired doctor who can't use his right hand anymore. But my coco (my head, you know) goes on spinning and maybe occasionally I work it pretty hard. It goes on day and night. All my life I've never stopped thinking. I think all writing is a disease. You can't stop it.

"I have worked with two or three friends in making the translation for I am no Greek scholar but have been veritably shocked by the official British translations of a marvelous poem by one of the greatest poets of all time. How their ears can have sanctioned the enormities that they produced is more than I can understand. American scholars must have been scared off by the difficulties of the job not to have done better. Their prosy versions were little better—to my taste. It may be that I also have failed but all I can say is that as far as I have been able to do I have been as accurate as the meaning of the words permitted—always with a sense of our own American idiom to instruct me."

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2/38R Pt 2 of 2