

I WANT TO SAY SOMETHING  
BUT SHAME PREVENTS  
ME. HERE ARE SOME  
OF YOUR LETTERS  
BACK. — O

#10

#9

#8

#7

oliver

January 22

My Ollie,

I read a fun line of Sappho, an ancient  
Greek poet, this week and wanted to  
share it with you! "Love shook my heart  
like a mountain wind falling on oak trees."

Isn't that lovely?

Love,

Aria

#6

#5

#4

#3

#2

#1

ARIA

APRIL 12

ARIA,  
I KNOW THAT YOU DO NOT KNOW ME VERY WELL,  
BUT WHEN I SAW YOU TODAY, LAUGHING AND  
TALKING WITH YOUR FRIEND, I COULDN'T SPEAK  
I COULDN'T BREATHE, I WAS OVERWHELMED.  
SEE, I COULDN'T THINK, I WAS OVERWHELMED.  
THE BLOOD IN MY VEINS BECAME ICE AND MY  
HEART BURST OUT OF MY CHEST. ALL BECAUSE YOU  
ARE MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN THE STARS. I MUST  
ASK A QUESTION: DID YOU FALL FROM HEAVEN?  
SURELY YOU DID, ONLY AN ANGEL COULD HAVE WORN  
THAT PURPLE DRESS AS WELL AS YOU DID. ☺  
THESE FLOWERS ARE FOR YOU. JOIN ME FOR  
COFFEE AT THE ESPRESSO ROYALE ON STATE  
STREET ON TUESDAY?

— OLIVER

## **Translator's Preface:**

This project features 31 poems of Sappho, reimagined as letters written between a young couple: Aria and Oliver. The ten letters and one post-it note (see photograph indicating multimedia nature of this project) chronicle fragments of the rise and fall of their year-long relationship. Yet the lovers are not placed in a specific time or place nor do they have determined ages – this is part of their mystery and their story. Not every letter they wrote to one another survives, mimicking the fragmentary nature of most of Sappho's poetry. Reading the ancient Greek, one only receives and can understand parts of the overall story. The same is witnessed with these notes. Sappho composed her verses over 2500 years ago, yet the sentiments of infatuation, love, longing, and heartbreak seem timeless. In this version, Oliver pursues Aria, she responds enthusiastically, they fall in love, he disappears and behaves badly, and she is ultimately left heartbroken. In my mind, Aria kept the letters to remind herself that she both is able to love deeply and can overcome the despair resulting from the sudden end of a relationship. She does not read them anymore, (she does not need to!), which is why she entrusted them to me.

No additional notes are necessarily needed to understand the story, as the letters are meant to be stand-alone pieces. However, if a reader wishes to truly see the connections between the letters and Sappho's poetry, either a thorough knowledge of her poems (in translation or in the original Greek) or the following typed version featuring footnotes with the corresponding fragment number of Sappho's poetry used as inspiration is needed.

As for readership, the letters are, of course, meant for the two lovers, but should be able to be read by anyone with an interest in their story who possesses a modest reading level.

Therefore the register is kept fairly informal, as these are personal letters meant for two people in love.

One of my most difficult choices as a translator was whether or not to change Sappho's poetry into prose. I did not feel I could do Sappho justice with my sub-par attempt at poetry. Instead I opted for letters written in prose. I felt it was easier to keep the time period unknown to the reader with prose instead of verse,. Additionally, my translation is fairly domesticizing. Words, phrases, and word order are altered such as expected by modern readers. However, there are instances that are intentionally foreignizing in an attempt to keep the language closer to the Greek. Most of these occurrences appear in the letters written by Oliver (especially the April 12 and August 6 letters). This is in an attempt to have Oliver seem more distant and therefore less engaged in the relationship. He writes more stilted, almost copied sounding, notes to Aria because he is unsure as to how to convey his feelings, even though he initiates the correspondence.

My favorite line of Sappho I could not bear to alter, so it remains as a fairly literal translation. Accordingly, Aria quotes fragment 47 in a letter to Oliver. This is my obvious gesture and tribute to Sappho, the gifted and remarkable poet who inspired this project.

This document consists only of this preface and the typed out letters in order to adhere to the CFC Translation Contest guidelines of a 5 page document. An additional file sent along with this includes a brief commentary with some of my choices as a translator, my grammar translations of the 31 fragments, and a short bibliography.

## Typed Out Version of the Letters:

(See also the book box with the actual letters)

April 12

Aria,

I know that you do not know me very well, but when I saw you today, laughing and talking with your friend, I couldn't speak, I couldn't breathe, I couldn't hear, I couldn't see, I couldn't think. I was overwhelmed. The blood in my veins became ice and my heart burst out of my chest.<sup>1</sup> All because you are more beautiful than the stars!<sup>2</sup> I must ask a question: did you fall from heaven? Surely you did. Only an angel could have worn that purple dress as well as you did.<sup>3</sup> ;)

These flowers are for you. Join me for coffee at the Espresso Royale on State Street on Tuesday?

-Oliver

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August 6

My darling Aria,<sup>4</sup>

When I first had a crush on you, I would pray that you would notice me.<sup>5</sup> And now we have been dating for three months! I am so very lucky that you are mine.

Oh Aria, there is no one else like you.<sup>6</sup> You are beautiful, graceful and caring.<sup>7</sup> You are the soft pillow I can come home to after a long day.<sup>8</sup> Your sweet voice, a melody sweeter than a golden harp, soothes me.<sup>9</sup> You are wonderful. I don't know how I ever get anything done at work, I am always thinking of you!

Happy 3 months!

-Your Oliver

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August 22

Oliver,

You know how people carve their initials into trees? I came up with ours:

Me + You = Love Forever<sup>10</sup> (in a heart). This way someone in the future can remember us and our love!<sup>11</sup>

With love,

Aria

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<sup>1</sup> 31

<sup>2</sup> 104B

<sup>3</sup> 54

<sup>4</sup> 163

<sup>5</sup> 22

<sup>6</sup> 113

<sup>7</sup> 108

<sup>8</sup> 46

<sup>9</sup> 153, 156

<sup>10</sup> 88B

<sup>11</sup> 147

September 29  
Ollie,

I am just sitting here, missing you, and reminiscing about the first date we went on. I was so happy when you asked me to get coffee with you. Did you know that I was also crazy about you? I didn't think you knew who I was! Now I am the happiest I have ever been and I always want to be near you. I cannot wait until Friday when I can see you again. I miss you so much. You are the only remedy for this lovesickness!<sup>12</sup>

Love,  
Aria

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December 13  
My Oliver,

I love you! I can't wait until we are old and gray and we can look back on our youth and laugh! Oh the many beautiful adventures you take me on, I never know what to expect next!<sup>13</sup> For we live the opposite of a boring life – we are daring!<sup>14</sup>

Love,  
Aria

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January 4  
My sweet Aria,

You shine like the bright moon in the night. Those around you dim in comparison to you as if they are bright stars overcome by your brilliance!<sup>15</sup>

I can already tell you're laughing at me – but there, my attempt at poetry!

-Your Oliver

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<sup>12</sup> 48

<sup>13</sup> 24A

<sup>14</sup> 24C

<sup>15</sup> 34

January 22  
My Ollie,

I read a fun line of Sappho, an ancient Greek poet, this week and wanted to share it with you!  
“Love shook my heart like a mountain wind falling on oak trees.”<sup>16</sup> Isn’t that lovely?

Love,  
Aria

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March 7  
My Oliver,

Where did you go? Why haven’t you answered my calls or my letters? Have you forgotten about me? Is it something I did? I miss you!<sup>17</sup> Please talk to me.

Love,  
Aria

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March 30  
Oliver,

I have no idea what to do. I’m torn.<sup>18</sup> Should I forgive you?

Isn’t it funny that the people I love and treat well are the ones who end up hurting me? Call me crazy but apparently I still want to suffer.<sup>19</sup> If you are truly and sincerely sorry, I could possibly forgive you. Promise me that you will stop sneaking around and be more honest with me. I do still love you. I am prepared to offer you one last chance ....

-Aria

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<sup>16</sup> 47

<sup>17</sup> 36 and 129A

<sup>18</sup> 51

<sup>19</sup> 26

April 11  
Oliver.

You have hurt me for the last time.<sup>20</sup> I found the purple scarf she sent to you from her trip to Paris.<sup>21</sup> But it wasn't the gift that angered me, it was the note! Reeking of her perfume, covered in her scrawling writing, thanking you for that wonderful weekend in New York and for all the lingerie you bought her.<sup>22</sup> A business trip, Oliver, really? This is it. We're over.

Oh how poorly things turned out for us! I guess the wonderful times we had weren't enough for you, I wasn't enough for you. You always wanted more, I suppose.<sup>23</sup> But your heart turned cold towards me and you let your wings down.<sup>24</sup> Instead of telling me how you were feeling and being honest with me, you left me guessing and uncertain. And now you apparently love someone else more than me.<sup>25</sup>

I did love you before, Oliver, but now I see your true self: childish and shameless.<sup>26</sup> Go run to your new lover for comfort, sleep on her shoulder instead of mine!<sup>27</sup>

May you be well, Oliver, and let me be well also.<sup>28</sup> Don't write to me again.

-Aria.

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(on sticky note)

I want to say something but shame prevents me.<sup>29</sup> Here are some of your letters back. -O

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<sup>20</sup> 38

<sup>21</sup> 101

<sup>22</sup> 100

<sup>23</sup> 94

<sup>24</sup> 42

<sup>25</sup> 129B

<sup>26</sup> 49

<sup>27</sup> 126

<sup>28</sup> 117

<sup>29</sup> 137

## Commentary:

- 1. When I saw you today, laughing and talking ... heart burst out of my chest** (April 12 Letter from Oliver): This portion of the letters was quite tricky to compose, as Fragment 31 is one of the more popular pieces of Sappho's poetry. It was difficult to convey the ideas presented in the Greek in a way that would be plausible for a man of an undisclosed age and an undisclosed time in a letter to a girl he is asking out on a date. I worry I remained too close to the original Greek and did not allow myself to stray away from a word-for-word translation.
- 2. Did you fall from heaven? Surely you did. Only an angel could have worn that purple dress as well as you did** (April 12 Letter from Oliver): Sappho's Greek translates more literally "having come from heaven, having put on a purple cloak." I retained the idea of coming from heaven – "fall from heaven" – and the idea of wearing a purple item of clothing.
- 3. Your sweet voice, a melody sweeter than a golden harp, soothes me** (August 6 Letter from Oliver): This line combines Fragments 153 ("sweet-voiced maiden") and 156 ("more sweet-sounding than a lyre, more golden than gold") into one sentence. The idea remains that she has a sweet voice and is intensified by the other fragment stating that a sound is more pleasing than a (gold) lyre.
- 4. Me + You = Love Forever** (August 22 Letter from Aria): This is a play on the fragment 88B. Only three words are readable in the ten-line poem: the accusative nouns 'me' (in the first line) and 'you' (in the fourth line) and the adjective or verb 'beloved'/'you love' (in the seventh line). I interpreted φιλη as referring to the verb and joined the words that were initially far apart in the poem into one phrase.
- 5. For we live the opposite of a boring life – we are daring!** (December 13 Letter from Aria): This is a very fragmentary poem, with possibly only four Greek words visible; I used three of them. Although the words "we live," "opposite," and "daring" were not originally connected so closely, they easily came together (with a few additional words and phrases) to tell a new story.
- 6. Love shook my heart like a mountain wind falling on oak trees** (January 22 Letter from Aria): This is my personal favorite line from Sappho and I could not bear to stray very far from Sappho's Greek. However, Eros becomes non-personified "love" and φρένας becomes "heart" (the seat of passions) in order to domesticate the translation and have the poetry be more understandable for a modern audience.
- 7. I have no idea what to do. I'm torn** (March 30 Letter from Aria): While the first line stays close to the Greek, I domesticized the idea of having two minds inside oneself to a modern "I'm torn."
- 8. For all the lingerie you bought her** (April 11 Letter from Aria): Sappho's Greek more literally translates "he/she/it covered her all around well with luxurious linens." I took the liberty of altering the idea of luxurious linens to something a bit more scandalous and appropriate for a sexual partner being cheated on while keeping the idea of a luxurious clothing item.

9. **I found the purple scarf she sent to you from her trip to Paris** (April 11 Letter from Aria): More modernizing liberty was taken here – changing χερρόμακτρα (head/hand cloths) to a “scarf” and Phocaea to “Paris.”
10. **I did love you before, Oliver, but now I see your true self: childish and shameless** (April 11 Letter from Aria): Sappho addresses this snippet to her female follower/friend/lover Atthis, whom I changed to Oliver. I am not totally happy with this change, as I feel it takes away from Sappho’s poetry and her identity, but the overall sentiment of loving someone before remains. Further, the two lines do not directly follow one another in the extant Greek, but I combined the two lines into one sentence.
11. **I want to say something but shame prevents me** (April 11 Letter from Aria): This line comes from Fragment 137, a possible dialogue between Alcaeus and Sappho. Oliver ends the correspondence being too ashamed to say anything on his behalf. This is a fine ending to the letters and their story, but if the reader knows their Sappho, they know that Sappho has a compassionate response to Alcaeus’ admittance of shame: “If you were to have a longing for good or beautiful things, and your tongue was not stirring up to say something evil, shame would not hold your eyes but you would speak on account of what is the just thing.”

## Grammar Translation:

End of 22 – Voigt

ὡς ἄρα μα[ι  
τοῦτο τῶ[(πος)  
β]όλλομα[ι

so I pray  
this word  
I want

24A – Voigt

]ανάγα[  
]. [ ]εμνάσεσθ' ἀ[  
κ]αὶ γὰρ ἄμμεσ ἐν νεό[τατι  
ταῦτ' ]ἐ]πότημμεν·  
πόλλ'α [μ]ὲν γὰρ καὶ κά[λα  
... η. [ ]μεν, πολι[  
ἄμμε[ . ]ὀ[ξ]είαισ δ[  
].. [ . ].. [

you will have remembered  
for even we in our youth  
we did these things  
indeed many and beautiful things  
to the city  
we ..... sharp?

24C – Voigt

]νθα[  
ζ]ώομ[εν]  
]ω·ν . . [  
]εναντ[  
]απάππ[  
τ]όλμαν  
]ανθρω[  
]ονεχ[  
]παισα[

we live  
  
opposite  
  
daring  
man

26 – Obbink

]θαμέω[  
ὄ]τινας[ γὰρ]  
εὖ θέω, κῆνοί με μά]λιστα πά[ντων]  
[σίνοντα]ι.  
] ἀλεμάτ[  
] γόνωμ[  
].ιμ' οὐ πρ[  
]αι  
] σέ· θέλω[  
]το πάθη[  
].αν· ἔγω δ' ἔμ' ]αὔται

often  
for whomever  
you behold well, those people most of all  
they harm  
in vain  
  
surely not  
  
you, I want  
to suffer this  
these things I for myself

τοῦτο σύ]νοῖδα  
] . τοισ[  
]εναμ[

I this

31 – Campbell

φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν  
ἔμμεν ὄνερ, ὅττις ἐναντίος τοι  
ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδυ φωνεί-  
σας ὑπακούει  
καὶ γελαίσας ἱμερόεν τό μ' ἦ μάν  
καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόησεν·  
ὡς γὰρ ἔς σ' ἰδὼ βροχε', ὡς με φώναι-  
σ' οὐδὲν ἐν ἔτ' εἴκει·  
ἀλλὰ ἄκαν μὲν γλῶσσα, λέπτον  
δ' αὐτίκα χρῶ πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμηκεν,  
ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδ' ἐν ὄρημ', ἐπιρρόμ-  
βεισι δ' ἄκουαι.  
καδ δέ μ' ἴδρωσ ψῦχος εχει, τρόμος δὲ  
παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας  
ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδεύης  
φαίνομ' ἔμ' αὐτά.  
ἀλλὰ πᾶν τόλματον, ἐπεὶ ...

That man seems to me to be a man equal  
to the gods, whoever he is sitting opposite you  
and listening near to you  
speaking sweetly  
and laughing charmingly, which truly  
causes my heart to flutter in my chest  
for when I look at you briefly, then nothing of  
a voice remains in me,  
but my tongue breaks, immediately  
thin fire runs under my skin,  
I see nothing with my eyes, my ears  
make a buzzing sound.  
A cold sweat runs over me, a trembling  
seizes all of me, I am greener than grass,  
in this I seem to me nearly  
to die. But altogether  
it must be dared, since a poor guy ...

34 – Campbell

ἄστερες μὲν ἀμφὶ κάλαν σελάνναν  
ἀψ ἀπυκρύπτοισι φάεννον εἶδος  
ὄπποτα πλήθοισα μάλιστα λάμπη  
γᾶν

The stars around the beautiful moon  
They hide back their radiant beauty  
when full the light especially  
on the earth

36– Voigt

καὶ ποθήω καὶ μάομαι

and I long for and desire

38 – Voigt

ὄπταις ἄμμε

you roast/burn us

42 – Voigt

ταῖσι <δὲ> ψῦχος μὲν ἔγεντ' ὁ θυμός,  
παρ δ' ἴεσι τὰ πτέρα

their heart became cold  
the wings were let down

46 – Voigt

ἔγω δ' ἐπὶ μολθάκαν  
τύλαν (κα)σπολέω μέλεα·

I upon a soft cushion  
will lower my limbs

47 – Campbell

Ἔρος δ' ἐτίναξέ μοι  
φρένας, ὡς ἄνεμος κατ' ὄρος δρύσιν ἐμπέτων.

Eros shook my heart/midriff/mind  
like the wind fell upon the oak tree down  
from the mountain

48 – Voigt

ἦλθες, ἔγω δέ σ' ἐμαιόμαν,  
ὄν δ' ἔψυξας ἔμαν φρένα καιομένην πόθῳ.

you came, I desired you  
you cooled my heart/mind, burning with  
desire

49 – Voigt

ἠράμαν μὲν ἔγω σέθεν Ἄτθι πάλαι πότα·

I loved you once long ago Atthis

σμίκρα μοι παῖς ἔμμεν' ἐφαίνεο κᾶχαρις.

You seemed to me to be a small girl without  
grace

51 – Voigt

οὐκ οἶδ' ὅττι θέω· δύο μοι τὰ νοήμ(μ)ατα

I don't know what I should do. I have two  
minds in me

54 – Voigt

ἐλθόντ' ἐξ ὀράνω πορφυρίαν  
περθέμενον χλάμυν

having come from heaven, having put on a  
purple chlamys/short cloak

88B – Voigt

ἐμ[

me (accusative)

τοῦ[

κ[

σε[

you (accusative)

ἦ[

α[

φιλη[

beloved/dear (adj); you love (verb)

κᾶλ . [

ἔστ . [

is?

.]χα[



126 – Voigt	δαύοις ἀπάλας ἐτα(ί)ρας ἐν στήθεσιν	may you sleep on the breast of your gentle companion
129A – Voigt	ἔμεθεν δ' ἔχησθα λάθαν	but you have forgetfulness of me = but you have forgotten me
129B – Voigt	ἢ τιν' ἄλλον ἀνθρώπων ἔμεθεν φίλησθα	or do you love someone else of men (some other man) (more) than me
137 – Voigt	(Ἄλκαος) θέλω τί τ' εἶπην, ἀλλά με κωλύει αἴδως . . . .....	Alcaeus: I want to say something to you, but shame prevents me
(Ψάπφω)	αἰ δ' ἦχες ἔσλων ἴμερον ἢ κάλων καὶ μή τί τ' εἶπην γλῶσσο' ἐκύκα κάκον  αἴδως κέν σε οὐκ ἦχεν ὄππατ', ἀλλ' ἔλεγες περὶ τῷ δικαίῳ	Sappho: If you were to have a longing for good or beautiful things, and your tongue was not stirring up to say something evil, shame would not hold your eyes but you would speak on account of what is the just thing
147 – Voigt	μνάσεσθαί τινά φαῖμι καὶ ἕτερον ἀμμέων.	I say that someone will remember us, even in another (time?)
153 – Voigt	πάρθενον ἀδύφωνον	sweet-voiced maiden
156 – Voigt	πόλυ πάκτιδος ἀδυμελεστέρα . . . χρύσω χρυσοτέρα . . .	much more sweet-sounding than a lyre more golden than gold
163 – Voigt	τὸ μέλημα τῶμον	my beloved/darling

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