

GEIST

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DULL PATCH, ON
SYMBIOSIS IN WARSAW
HANDY TIPS FROM NICOPOLIS



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GEIST

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FEATURES

SYMBIOSIS IN WARSAW

Ola Szczecinska

*We drink tea that Grandma made
from linden leaves that she picked.
She tells me her war stories.*

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SAPPHO QUESTIONS MEDUSA

Carla Nappi

*Desire, he said, wants
what is not in reach.
So reach for me and
dance me out of death.*

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WORKING TITLES

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Sappho Questions Medusa

CARLA NAPPI

The piece below is part of an ongoing project in which Carla Nappi, an historian, and Carrie Jenkins, a philosopher, reimagine Plato's *Symposium* into a collection of poems that centre women's voices. It transforms a speech from *Symposium*, "Socrates Questions Agathon," into the story of what might have happened if Sappho and Medusa had become lovers. Instead of Socrates pressing Agathon to anatomize and dissect the depiction of love that the poet had offered in his own speech, here Sappho herself is anatomized into rocks and gems and fossils through the love of her interlocutor. (Readers who are interested in reading this piece in conversation with the original text will spot the section of Plato's "Socrates Questions Agathon" that informed its corresponding poem by following the numbers in each poem's title: 198B-C, 198D, etc.)



0 (198B-C). *In which Sappho's poems are petrified before she has time to edit*

- 1 My words are rock, my lyrics turned to stone
- 2 just as I was about to trim them down.
- 3 I'm left to time, then, as too much of me.
- 4 (I'd run if there had been a where to run
- 5 to, out beyond the shrivelled space of now.)
- 6 A woman whose dark hair's a hissing crown
- 7 turned Gorgon eyes on me. (Has she seen you?)
- 8 (This is the count of every thing. One, two.)

1 (198D). *And so we are left with a poet not in fragments but instead as overabundance*

- 1 My words got tangled in her snaky head
- 2 and I found myself giving up my dawn
- 3 my lyre my long transparent dress
- 4 my music and now there's too much of me
- 5 and of my words my songs myself my love...
- 6 I tried to cut them back in life, in death,
- 7 because I knew well that I didn't know
- 8 the first thing about love. Poor, dear Sappho
- 9 who's too much left. But that's also, you see,
- 10 To be the winner. Paingiver. That's me.

2 (198E-199A). *What happens when a poet
and a Gorgon have a love affair?*

1 And as my lover turns my voice to stone,
2 the Gorgon bites into it like a peach
3 and chews and chews and chews
4 and
5 chews
6 and
7 chews
8 (What if your lover threw the pulp away
9 and ate only the seeds the peel the stem,
10 and what if that's the way she ate you, too,
11 would you feel like a tree that fruited wrong?)
12 Toss me that apple and I'll sing a song.

3 (199B). *And so, as the Gorgon reads what her lover writes,
and the eyes make love to the curves of the words, in those
movements the poetry is petrified.*

1 Rock worms crawl hard in the strata of me,
2 a rotting body that's rot's opposite.
3 I kiss my lover with a mouldy mouth
4 and try to breathe a poem in my kiss
5 while letters in my lungs go petrified
6 and each glass word rips tissue in its teeth,
7 a fossil of a phrasing of desire
8 as songs precipitate out from my flesh.
9 Break my body open when it's done
10 and read my love traced in the stony breath
11 and find the questions trapped there in my gut
12 and crack my stony bowel to pull them free
13 and hold them up like Yorick's skull to see:
14 And is this to be loved, or not to be?

4 (199C). *And the reader turns paleontologist digging
for the bones of music in the stone, as the lover digging
in the body of her beloved.*

1 Gentle as you brush the crusted blood
2 from vowels knobbing from my bones, and gentle
3 while you split the muscle as it sheets
4 like mica from the rhyming in my thigh,
5 and gentle, please, be gentle as you bring
6 the cracking constant hammer down again
7 to try to loose the music from my teeth,
8 and gentle, as you pry them from my gums
9 and drop the jagged fragments in a jar
10 already white with love-bleached bits of flesh
11 that make a pretty tinkling when you shake.
12 What if a poem set like sediment
13 its lines its layers hardening with time
14 its verses hiding fossils in the sand?
15 What if we bury creatures in a song?
16 (Y'all who sang before me did it wrong.)

5 (199D). *So, dig. And ask your questions.*

1 I watch the bits of sand drop into place
2 like jagged punctuation heaping piles
3 of stops and pauses stops and pauses stops
4 and stops and stops made out of little stones.
5 I follow their directions, one by one,
6 and stop. And stop. I stop. I stop. I pause,
7 I wait, I watch. A drop, a stop, I wait,
8 a drop, I watch. A geologic woman
9 marking time in sediment and breath
10 until the limestone like a mother heaves
11 her body metamorphic from the earth
12 as she gives marble birth to love deformed.
13 And whalebones stretch and pull her marble flesh,
14 her crystal belly chambers into vast
15 nautiloid hunger as it eats itself
16 alive, and watch I watch I rise I carve
17 new punctuation on this poet's breast.
18 What's happy if she's not the happiest?

6 (199E). *Now try to tell me about love.*

1 What happens when you fossilize a voice?
2 Does it flake out from the lungs in sheet
3 music played by the wind and birds and rain?
4 (She once dreamed of a dinosaur who tried
5 to sing a song to his beloved but
6 all he could make with his crocodile throat
7 were low deep booms and so his lover thrust
8 her listening head down deep into the sand
9 and it stayed there until some eager boy
10 from some eager time came with pick and knife
11 and chipped away her ears and put the bones
12 into his little eager bag and slung
13 the sound stones on his shoulder with his lunch
14 and drove away. And after she awoke
15 whenever she would open lips and throat
16 all that came out were low deep booms and so
17 she loved her lover like a crocodile
18 and breathed out reptile valentines, her skin
19 scaling to play the sounds her voice recalled.)
20 (Her skin's a purse, now. Fashion for the fall.)

7 (200A). *Then keep this object of love in mind,
and remember what it is.*

1 I see you, feathered serpent. Sweet winged snake,
2 who coils at me in seashells and in wind-
3 borne dust around my head that settles in
4 amid my braids and covers me in time.
5 Desire depends on absence of the one
6 desired, they tell me. So I sit alone
7 with neck craned up to spot my pterosaur,
8 remembering how I wove your hissing hair
9 into a writhing pair of wings, and how
10 I pressed into your head like clay and raised
11 a regal beaky crown. (Don't look at me,
12 my love: please turn around.) Quetzalcoatl
13 above me like a meteor demanding
14 sacrifice. What will you ask of me,
15 the woman waiting for you on the land,
16 if ever the sky lets you come back home?
17 Don't ask yourself what's likely, Socrates
18 said to a room once: think of what must be.
19 And so from sun to Socrates I turn,
20 and to necessity as my concern.
21 And when life wears me out, they'll find me dressed
22 in raggy wings I'll staple to my breast
23 when thinking of the love who wore them best.

8 (200B). *Presumably, no one is in need of those
things he already has.*

1 Before my body ages into stone
2 I'll open up my throat and sing for you
3 so that my voice creates a kind of time
4 that makes a kind of home where you can dwell.
5 And when the final beating of my heart
6 comes knocking on your door, you'll find me there,
7 a column like a tree gone petrified.
8 Come touch my bark and turn me on my side
9 and make a deep cut through the trunk of me
10 and close your eyes and run your fingers round
11 the sedimenting of my voice like tree
12 rings marking out the rich years and the lean
13 and play me like a record of what's been.
14 And will you, love, not then be satisfied?
15 Our story should have storms inside, you said.
16 Fulfilling a desire kills it dead.
17 Look upon the ocean when it roils
18 and metamorphosis is what you'll see.
19 Look upon the waters when they're still
20 and what you'll see is yourself staring back.
21 Though satisfaction calms the choppy seas,
22 let us be groping kraken in a squall
23 instead of honest mirrors on a wall
24 that smudge and crack and shatter when they fall.



9 (200C).

But maybe a solitary woman could want to be solitary.

We'll live inside a conch shell on a shore
and I can make my bed up at the tip
while you explore the water at the lip
and when my song twists toward you through the whorls,
the words accreting memories like pearls,
you'll string them up and wear them as a crown.

*In cases like these, you might think people really do want to
be things they already are.*

I'll find a crown-of-thorns starfish and string
the coral alveoli from my lungs
and drape the garland on the creature's spines
and crawl inside one of the little globes
so when you see the moonlight on the sea
you won't know that the tinsel's hiding me.

I bring them up so they won't deceive us.

You'll know of me the way you know of tinsel
coming into life in the earth's mantle
(amethysts and other fruits of trouble),
rising to the surface with the pebbles
doing just their darndest to be humble,
finding friends only amidst the fossils.

*If you stop to think about them, you will see that these
people are what they are, whether they want to be or not.*

I'll make my fossil friendships in the sand
while bits of me are crumbling into sand,
I'll give my spine to trilobites, the sand
will polish all my ribs and when the sand
is done the arthropods will swim through sand
to come and claim my bones.

*And who, may I ask, would ever bother to desire what's
necessary?*

You'll live inside a cowry on the shore,
forgetting what your pearly crown was for.

10 (200D). *Whenever you say, I desire what I already
have, ask yourself whether you don't mean this:*

1 To love, he said, is only to desire
2 the preservation of what one has now.
3 And so preserve me, lover. With your stare
4 you'll raise a fossil fauna from my ribs.
5 You look at me wiwaxic and the scales
6 grow skeletal upon me, spiny fingers
7 feather forth to brush across my bones.
8 Preserve me, keep me safe, glance at me
9 opabinic, sprouting stony stalky eyes
10 upon my feet to stretch and reach and look
11 upon you as you kill to keep me safe
12 from time from death from you. Preserve me, love.
13 Make me hallucinogenic from the needling
14 worms your vision makes from crack and crush
15 as they crawl from my mouth and craft a smile
16 of spike and prick fit only for your kiss.
17 And when I'm found in fragments years from now
18 they'll gather up what's left inside a box
19 and label it and put it on a shelf
20 until one afternoon an artist, bored
21 of this or that will come to reconstruct
22 me in a spiny prehistoric story
23 of extinct morphologies of love.
24 With paint and ink she'll raise me from the dead
25 and bloom fantastic gardens from my flesh
26 and make of me a lost strange clan of beasts
27 that time herself refused to let go of.
28 And will you recognize me then, my love?



