

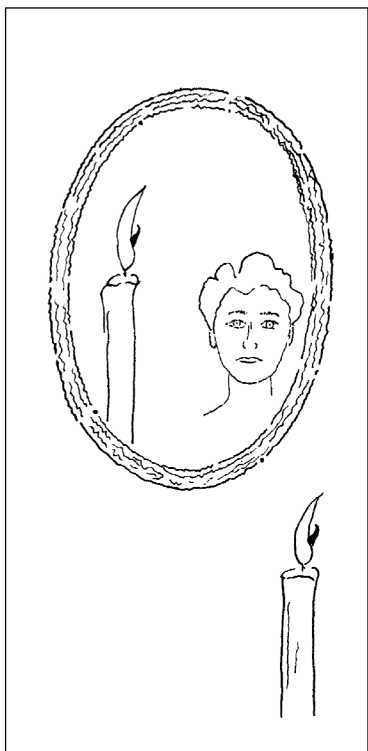
## *Sappho's Journal* — A Voice from the Past

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*Sappho's Journal* by Paul Alexander Bartlett. Foreword by Willis Barnstone.  
Autograph Editions, 2007. 172 pp., illustrated. \$12.95  
ISBN 978-0615156460

One of the most personally engaging ways to keep the classics alive is to enter into the world as it was experienced by a unique and fascinating individual from long ago. To be able to do this across the intervening rift of many centuries, when that person did not leave behind a detailed autobiography, can only be done, with vividness and authenticity, through the art of fiction. If we rely only on Sappho's fragments of poetry that have escaped the gradual obliteration of time most of us can only vaguely glimpse the extraordinary woman who wrote some 2,600 years ago.

In *Sappho's Journal*, novelist and artist Paul Alexander Bartlett allows us to enter into the poet's inner world, to experience her sense of beauty, her loves and fears, reflections, and dedication. Based on a careful study of ancient Greece and Sappho's surviving fragments of poetry, Bartlett has recreated Sappho in a lyrical account of the life, passion, and faith of this re-



markable woman whose intimate journal takes us back to 642 B.C.

Perhaps we could let Sappho speak here for herself in a sample passage from *Sappho's Journal*:

*Villa Poseidon, Mytilene*  
642 B.C.

Fog, as grey as a shepherd's cloak, ruffled the bay for a day and a night. Then, stabbing us, came clarity, and inside that clarity, centered in it, a brown intaglio, a small wooden carving, first one ship and then another. Our fleet had sailed back to us! I watched from the terrace, unable to speak. Atthis ran up to me. Anaktoria came. Gyrinno came. Boys yelled. Old men rushed past the house. Dogs barked. Someone banged a drum. Such clamoring!

But was it joyous news, I asked myself? Why were the women in a knot at the corner? Why hadn't fast rowers raced to tell us? Had the fog tricked the fleet?

Changing my clothes, putting on new sandals, I walked to the pier and the seagulls screamed and we waited and waited. People surged all about, saying wild things, shrieking—then, ominously, fell silent. Their shouts were better than their silence. The ocean seemed too calm, as if it had been smothered by the fog or dreaded the arrival of our fleet.

I had pictured the ships as fast moving, bright on bright water.

As the first one approached, I saw no happy faces, no lifted hands, no raised shields, no plumed helmets at the rail, no flags.

I heard an oar drag and in that sound I heard the rasp of death. If Alcaeus is dead, I will take poison—and I saw myself going to Xerxes, our Persian chemist, and asking for the powder. We had agreed, years back, during another crisis, that he would allow me this gift to free myself, if I must. His yellow face vanished, as I watched an anchor plunge slowly and saw the sail topple into the water and heard a man cry some name.

Shouts went up.

A chorus began.

Voices caught our song, way out at sea, assuring us that these were not phantoms.

Alcaeus?

Ten years ago, almost ten—ten years ago, he had left Mytilene, the wars sweeping him away. Ten years we had lived with fear creeping about our island. Ten years—how my fingers trembled. I saw those years, there on the wharf, saw them in the gulls' wings, in the distraught

faces about me, my girls', my friends', my neighbors'. We had all waited for this homecoming. And now, now our fleet was gliding toward us, grey-hulked, no flags raised, oars shuffling like sick crabs.

Was it defeat or half-victory? Who, among our men, was lost, dead, or wounded? Gull on the masthead, apple at the end of the bough, what can you tell us at such crucial times? For an infinitude, the oars paced, a boat swung, another boat anchoring alongside, the armor on deck flashing, the waves gulping at the gulls.

I turned away, moved back.

And then I saw someone helping Alcaeus ashore—wounded or ill—  
and old, old, I thought.

Beauty said to me: This is only change.

And I said: But what is change?

And I slipped away, not daring to meet him, hoping someone would shout a name and confirm that this was another, not Alcaeus. But no, I knew. A woman knows a man she has loved, however battered he may be. I turned to watch his blundering progress.

The chorus had dwindled—only those at sea, the far off crews, still carried the hymn. I could not remain any longer. I hurried home, past his house to mine, wondering what kind of haven it

could be, wondering what people would say at my flight. Yet this was not flight; it was merely a postponement, waiting for a sign, a chance to prepare myself. Alcaeus...must I send someone to him? What must I do? Go to his home? Shall I be there for him when he arrives?

At my door I turned and retraced my steps to his house, the laces of my sandals making a sound I had never heard before, the gulls wailing, the sounds from the wharf intermingling and incomprehensible.

And I was there when he came with his servant, an ugly Parthian, helping him. Yes, I was there and put out my hand to touch him, hearing his troubled breathing, seeing his torn and disheveled clothes, his rank beard, and knowing he was ill. I remembered the dream, the ship with its broken sail. And I remembered our love and I said to him:

“Alcaeus...it is I, Sappho...”



He squared his shoulders, his cloak slipping away. His arms went out to me, then dropped to his side.

His eyes had the marble core of nothingness in them.

Appalled, I could scarcely stand. O God, what is this that can happen to a man? Why has it happened? His arms in bandages, his eyes forever bandaged by the dark.

“Alcaeus...”

He heard my whisper and shuffled backwards, bumping his servant; he moved forward then and gripped me hard, twisting my flesh, his great muscles rising in his hands.

“Take me to my room... You haven’t forgotten the way, have you?”

I took his arm and the Parthian opened the door and servants bowed about us; yes, I took his arm and silently we climbed the stairs to his room, his clothes rough against me, his sea smell around me. We passed his library that held the books he had loved. We passed his mother’s room, where she had died. We passed where light fell around us, though no light entered his eyes.

“You are in your room,” I said.

“Where?”

“Beside your Egyptian chair.”

“Can I sit down on it?”

“Yes, it’s ready for you.”

Grasping the heavy frame, he lowered himself and the taut leather squeaked. I placed a pillow behind him and drew a fur across his knees, then sat next to him. The door had shut itself and we were alone. We listened to each other’s breathing and his hand sought mine and climbed my robe to my face and the coarse fingers felt my cheek and I felt them reach my heart, with the past roaring around me like the recent storm.

I couldn’t speak. I felt that the war was forever between us and I hated those years, those battles, the lines on his face. My hate was there, between us. Then, then, tears came to his eyes. Silently, he wept. And I drew him to me.

I heard the wind cross over his house.

Voices shuffled below us in the courtyard, the excited voices of the caretakers, the idle, the hangers-on. I could imagine their leers, their whispers. I lifted his face toward mine and kissed him, his heavy beard sticking my mouth.

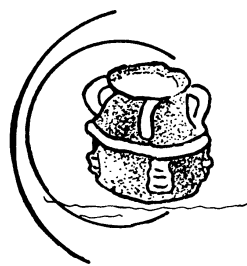
There was a sob—a broken gasp. How ill he looked, how tired...

“You must lie down, Alcaeus. Come, I’ll help you.”

And when he was settled, I brought him water.  
 “Water...there hasn't been much water these last few days at sea...”



Paul Alexander Bartlett is known for his fiction, including *When the Owl Cries* and *Adiós Mi México*, historical novels set during the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and descriptive of hacienda life, *Forward, Children!*, a powerful antiwar novel, and numerous short stories. He is also the author of books of poetry, including *Spokes for Memory* and *Wherehill*, the nonfiction work, *The Haciendas of Mexico: An Artist's Record*, the first extensive artistic and photographic study of haciendas throughout Mexico, and numerous articles about the Mexican haciendas. Bartlett is also known as an artist whose paintings, illustrations, and drawings have been exhibited in more than 40 one-man shows in leading museums in the U.S. and Mexico. Pen-and-ink illustrations by him, a few of which are reproduced here, add to the delight in reading *Sappho's Journal*.



*Sappho's Journal* is one of five independent works of fiction which together make up *Voices from the Past*, a quintet of novels that describe the inner lives of five extraordinary people, and collected together in a single large volume published separately by Autograph Editions. Progressing through time from the most distant to the most recent they are: Sappho, Jesus, Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, and Abraham Lincoln. For the most part, little is known about the inward realities of these people, about their personal thoughts, reflections, and the quality and nature of their feelings. For this reason they have become no more than voices from the past: The contributions they have left us remain, but little remains of each person, of his or her personality, of the loves, fears, pleasures, hatreds, beliefs, and thoughts each had.

*Voices from the Past* was written by Paul Alexander Bartlett over a period of several decades. After his death as a result of an automobile accident in 1990, the manuscripts of the five novels were discovered among his as yet unpublished papers. He had been at work adding the finishing touches to the manuscripts. Now, more than a decade and a half after his death, the publication of the five novels of *Voices from the Past* is overdue.

*Sappho's Journal* brings a new freshness to the reader's appreciation of Sappho and of classical antiquity. Willis Barnstone, noted Sappho translation and commentary, praised *Sappho's Journal*:

Paul Alexander Bartlett's journal of Sappho is a masterful work.... He was faced with the almost impossible task of reconstructing the personality of Sappho and her background in ancient Lesbos. To my happy surprise he did so, in a work which is at once poetic, dramatic and powerful. In *Sappho's Journal* he does more than create a vague illusion of the past. He conveys the character of real people, their interior life and outer world. A mature artist, he writes with ease and taste.

### *The Author's Background*

Paul Alexander Bartlett (1909-1990) was a writer and artist, born in Moberly, Missouri, and educated at Oberlin College, the University of Arizona, the Academia de San Carlos in Mexico City, and the Instituto de Bellas Artes in



Guadalajara. His work can be divided into three categories: He is the author of many novels, short stories, and poems; second, as a fine artist, his drawings, illustrations, and paintings have been exhibited in many leading galleries, including the Los Angeles County Museum, the Atlanta Art Museum, the Bancroft Library, the Richmond Art Institute, the Brooks Museum, the Instituto-Mexicano-Norteamericano in Mexico City, and many others; and, third, he devoted much of his life to the most comprehensive study of the haciendas of Mexico that has been undertaken. More than 350 of his pen-and-ink illu-

strations of the haciendas and more than one thousand hacienda photographs make up the Paul Alexander Bartlett Collection held by the Nettie Lee Ben-

son Latin American Collection of the University of Texas, and form part of a second diversified collection held by the American Heritage Center of the University of Wyoming, which also includes an archive of Bartlett's literary work, fine art, and letters.

Paul Alexander Bartlett's fiction has been commended by many authors, among them Pearl Buck, Ford Madox Ford, John Dos Passos, James Michener, Upton Sinclair, Evelyn Eaton, and many others. He was the recipient of many grants, awards, and fellowships, from such organizations as the Leopold Schepp Foundation, the Edward MacDowell Association, the New School for Social Research, the Huntington Hartford Foundation, the Montalvo Foundation, and the Carnegie Foundation.

His wife, Elizabeth Bartlett (1911-1994), a widely published poet, is the author of seventeen published books of poetry, numerous poems, short stories, and essays published in leading literary quarterlies and anthologies, and, as the founder of Literary Olympics, Inc., is the editor of a series of multi-language volumes of international poetry that honor the work of outstanding contemporary poets.

Paul and Elizabeth's son, Steven, edited and designed *Sappho's Journal*.