

## Sulpicia

*Translated by Adrienne Ho*

The poems of **Sulpicia** are the only extant female literary text from the Augustan period (1st century BCE) of ancient Rome. They offer unique insight into a woman's life and mind at a time when most women remained not only illiterate but, in the male-dominated world of elegiac poetry, also silent. More than for these semi-postured, proto-feminist, torch-like conjectures, I'm drawn to Sulpicia for entirely personal reasons. I like her. Or rather, I like who I imagine she might have been ñ a smart, coquettish, young literary brat.

Sulpicia's poems are found at the end of Book 3 of Tibullus' manuscript, and total no more than forty lines. They follow the conventions of elegiac poetry, exploring desire and the unattainable through the alternating hexameter and pentameter lines of the elegiac distich. Sulpicia's pithy, mercurial emotions are inheritors of Catullus' epigrams, but her use of language is of its own idiosyncratic cast. For example, poem 3.16 opens with convoluted, circumlocutory syntax, which translates literally, "Love comes at last, of which kind it would be a greater rumour of shame to me to conceal than to reveal," while elegiac catchwords like pudor (shame), cura (concern, anxiety, girlfriend), and gaudia (pleasure), words that have established particular connotations when expressed by the male lover/poet, tailspin onto their heads when Sulpicia uses them to speak about herself: Is it a moral shame, or is she blushing? Does she think of herself as cause for anxiety, or is she paying homage to the topos? Poem 3.18 runs amok in fits and starts with its single rambling six-line sentence, rushing past the limit of the traditional end-stopped couplet.

Situated after the dozens of Sulpicia translations that have appeared over centuries, my approach to these elegies is first that of a poet. I aim for Sulpicia's sense with contemporary, if not at times syntactically erratic, language and sensibility, questioning the conventions and traditions of Latin translation into English, and writing our Latin poet as if she were writing here and, perhaps most importantly, now.

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:: SULPICIAE ELEGIDAE ::

III.xiii

Tandem uenit amor, qualem texisse pudori  
    quam nudasse alicui mihi fama magis.  
exorata meis illum Cytherea Camenis  
    attulit in nostrum deposuitque sinum.  
exoluit promissa Venus: mea gaudia narret,  
    <sup>5</sup>  
    dicetur si quis non habuisse sua,  
non ego signatis quicquam mandare tabellis,  
    me legat ut nemo quam meus ante, uelim,  
sed peccasse iuuat, uultus componere famae  
    taedet: cum digno digna fuisse ferar.

3.13 I LOVE YOU AND I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING

Next thing you know there'll be talk.  
*Look who's finally in love*, anyone could tell on the spot.  
Venus did the work, but the poems were mine;  
she piled my lap so full of love  
that even the lonely feel a sympathetic flutter.  
My postcards blab the news.  
They're here for you to read  
and for everyone else's gossip.  
But I don't care, this reputation chatter makes me sick —  
and why should I, now that there's a match.

III.xiv

Inuisus natalis adest, qui rure molesto  
et sine Cerintho tristis agendus erit.  
dulcius urbe quid est? an uilla sit apta puella  
atque Arrentino frigidus amnis agro?  
iam, nimium Messalla mei studiose, quiescas;  
non tempestiuae saepe, propinque, uiae.  
his animum sensusque meos abducta relinquo,  
arbitrio quam uis non sinit esse meo.

3.14 O COSMOPOLIS,

Illness, like sleep, is a mild form of death,  
your last ex just a pinch of disaster.  
In small dashes no thing's tough, or a test:  
suck it up, dear, and get dinner started.  
The countryside, like death, is just smelly  
*liquamen*<sup>1</sup> to wait out in the meantime.  
Don't get worked up, no need to be fussy.  
Replace your stock *it's burning!* with *it's fine*.

5

What is sweeter than the city? You know.  
Bumpkins, frocked and bonneted, are lucky  
plain and simple – they call the country home.  
Away from you and Rome just sucks for me.

O what I'd give, some vetch or lovage canned,  
to leave this vile, *miser* arable land.

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<sup>1</sup> The ancient Roman equivalent to Vietnamese fishsauce, made by fermenting mackerel-like fish and salt in sealed amphorae; highly prized, widely used. Also known as *garum*.

III.xv

Scis iter ex animo sublatum triste puellae?  
natali Romae iam licet esse tuo.  
omnibus ille dies nobis natalis agatur,  
qui nec opinanti nunc tibi forte uenit.

3.15 BLINDSPOT

Late breaking news: I'm coming after all,  
so leave the door unlocked, or better  
set ajar  
but don't wait up.  
The hall should be just dim enough to make out the shapes.

III.xvi

Gratum est, securus multum quod iam tibi de me  
permittis, subito ne male inepta cadam.  
sit tibi cura togae potior pressumque quasillo  
scortum quam Serui filia Sulpicia:  
solliciti sunt pro nobis, quibus illa dolori est  
ne cedam ignoto maxima causa toro.

3.16 FEINT

You say you've got this pounding lover  
just left of your right temple.  
Inauspicious megrim lover  
can't make it lover can't  
even get off the couch.  
Thing is, I know  
a thing or two  
about this kind of pain  
the searing lover oh the heat the lover  
kind of pain that feels so lover good  
you can't help but lover give'r in the lover ass.

III.xvii

Estne tibi, Cerinthe, tuae pia cura puellae,  
quod mea nunc uexat corpora fessa calor?  
a ego non aliter tristes euincere morbos  
optarim, quam te si quoque uelle putem.  
at mihi quid prosit morbos euincere, sit tu  
nostra potes lento pectore ferre mala?

3.17 HOT FLASH

Heat wracks my body. No, not that kind.  
If it were, you'd be here already.  
But listen to me, I'm on the brink of death here, just a little.  
Do you care?  
If not, neither will I.  
I'll just keep on these meds and menthols  
until something happens. You won't even notice.

III.xviii

Ne tibi sim, mea lux, aequae iam feruida cura  
ac videor paucos ante fuisse dies,  
si quicquam tota commisi stulta iuuenta  
cuius me fatear paenituisse magis,  
hesterna quam te solum quod nocte reliqui,  
<sup>5</sup>  
ardorem cupiens dissimulare meum.

Through the door left ajar  
lamplight wets the floor so that I am walking on it  
and the murk seems at times lambent  
and cicadas all over the night air  
intensify the atmosphere  
as if it were that time, as it had been  
that time

stolen away in the dust and among the broken branches  
like lovers, we were  
lovers then  
there speaking softly in tones that lovers use  
when one lover attempts with all her tenderness  
to say, in fact, that she  
no longer

softly

and the backbone gets in the way  
the marrow of it perforce  
thunders in  
sets all the winged things aflutter  
in the gold wash thrushing  
so in the patch on the ground from the door left ajar comes someone

veins pounding

walking on it