Sappho's Leap

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I HAVE SEEN THE GOD POSEIDON

Far off the ocean casts its convex tide
Toward the moon. The pale exactitude
Of that pacific flow has occupied
My figuring, and fed it as with food.

But I have never seen the ocean whole.
Never the ageless shining flank of it,
Though I, upstart, stood watching from the mole
When Archimedes raised it up a bit.

Another time I tracked Poseidon down
The empty marble alleys of the sea,
And well do I recall his puzzled frown
When, in the depths of perfect currents, he
Beheld the trembling substance of a leaf
Engendered in a salt-encrusted reef.

HOWARD BAKER

SAPPHO’S LEAP

There is a white cliff, sea-worn, temple-scarred,
Off Greece, where a sad victim annually
Went to his death, tossed outward on a hard
Meticulous arc between the shrine and sea,
His frantic forearms threaded to a cloud
Of sparrows or a hide of airy sweep.

Later, these orgiæ spent and disavowed,
The cliff assumed the name of Sappho’s Leap.

No one believes that Sappho leapt toward death
From this white rock. Yet he who loves must own
To dreams of birdwings, and the sea’s harsh breath,
In which he’s sometimes thrower, sometimes thrown
Whoever loves can’t ever put behind
The harrowing sweet history of his kind.