

AENEID
BOOKS I-VI

VIRGIL

(PUBLIUS VERGILIUS MARO)

(BOOKS I-VI)

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
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AENEID

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THE POET AND THE FLY

iamque faces et saxa volant—furor arma ministrat

Publius Vergilius Maro—whom we call Virgil—lived through the rise of Julius Caesar, during the final days of the Roman Republic and its reformation into a Empire under the rule of a single man, the emperor Augustus, his patron. The *Aeneid* was written as this new Roman Empire's foundational myth, and not only the poem, but also the writing of the poem became part of the foundational myth of empire. We are told that the work was not quite finished when Virgil died, and that he asked for it to be burned upon his death, but that Augustus—the emperor, the patron—having the final word in these matters, insisted it be published as soon as possible. Augustus wanted his foundation. The empire built upon this poem lasted for centuries. The *Aeneid* became a cornerstone of Latin education, the sort of thing one had to memorize in school: it was everywhere. Even after the Roman Empire collapsed, the *Aeneid* was everywhere. Now it was just the foundation of an educated mind, the sort of school text that was important because it was important, familiar because it was familiar. New and unexpected ideas grew on this foundation. Virgil was understood as a pagan prophet, whose writings told of the coming of Christ. The *Aeneid* was, at times, a source of prophecies, of fortune telling; open the poem to a random page, let your finger alight upon a line, and you will find the oracular answer to any question. In twelfth-century Naples, the idea arose that Virgil was a magician. John of Salisbury writes that Virgil once asked someone whether he would prefer a bird to be created that could capture birds, or a fly that could kill flies. He created a fly; the fly killed flies; Naples was free from flies, or from all flies except Virgil's fly.

This is all true, in the way that these things are true. There is some historical evidence for some of these claims, but some of them could be reasonably argued with; some are contemporary traditions, some are later traditions. They are true in the way the *Aeneid* is true, or the way it might have been true for its original readers. The Trojan War happened, or it might have happened, but perhaps not as Homer describes it in the *Iliad*, or how we remember Homer describing it in the *Iliad*, assuming we've read the *Iliad*. Perhaps we read it a long

time ago; perhaps we've just read about the *Iliad*, or read a summary of it (like the medieval Latin *Ilias Latina*, just over a thousand lines). Perhaps we have heard its story retold, or watched a movie about it. Even today the *Iliad* tells us the truth about the Trojan War (even if it is not the truth of the archaeological record, or even the truth of the poem's text). The *Aeneid* changes the *Iliad*—it reaches back to insert new truths there. (The 2004 film *Troy* continues this: Aeneas makes an ostentatious appearance as Troy burns.)

Aeneas, son of Anchises: he escapes Troy as it burns and leads a group of men by boat toward Italy, where he will found a new city. He is waylaid en route and ends up in Carthage, in northern Africa, where he seduces and then abandons Dido, Queen of the Carthaginians. His father dies, and funerary games are held; the fleet lands in Italy, and Aeneas visits the underworld, where he sees his father again and meets the men who will be born as great Romans in the future. So go the first six books; in the final six books, Aeneas returns to the surface world, tries to woo a young woman, and engages in war with the locals, and specifically against the man who is supposed to marry that young woman. Aeneas wins, and Rome is founded.

That is the plot, but the plot—except for Book IV, the seduction and betrayal of Dido, or perhaps Book VI, the voyage to the underworld—was not what mattered in the long run: what mattered was the words. The words served as grammatical or poetical examples, as tools of prophecy, as playthings for later poets. A genre of poetry emerged around the third century called the cento, which patched together lines of poetry—usually lines of Virgil's ubiquitous poetry—into new contexts and meanings. Ausonius wrote a 'Cento Nuptualis', a marriage poem made out of recontextualized lines of Virgil, including a suggestive section detailing the consummation of the marriage. A premodern *bricolage*, the 'Cento Nuptualis' drew out the latent eroticism which the words of the poem made available to a reader who was willing to read them against the grain, away from the plot.

And yet the present translation returns the plot to the *Aeneid*. So for example, here is another truth about the text that is not reflected in the text: the *Aeneid*, like other classical epic poems, begins *in medias res*, in the middle of things, with a storm threatening the ship. But the text, in fact, does not begin here—rather, it begins

with its most famous line, “*Arma virumque cano...*” I sing of war and of a man: a statement of purpose, followed by an invocation of the muse, and then finally the storm. This translation removes the statement of purpose and the invocation of the muse; it launches right into the shipwreck: “Clouds snatch sun from the sky.”

Translation: etymologically, the word suggests a carrying across, from one language to another, from one culture to another, from one time and place to another. From Troy to Italy. From a culture where poets are tools of the state, to a culture where poets are magicians. David Bellos has pointed out that other cultures use other metaphors to talk about translation, such as “turning”—and we can also think of translation as turning a text-for-them into a text-for-us, with all the topological reconfiguration that such a turning requires. Does our *Aeneid* require a statement of purpose? Our custom is to put our statements of purpose on the backs of our books. Does it require an invocation of the muse? That... *what?* Who *does* that? I guess some poets still do that. Would Virgil be that kind of poet? This translation argues: No. This translation argues: We do not need to nervously hold onto every word of the original text as if it were a lifeline. There are enough other translations of this poem for the nervous. There is something in the original text that can only be reached by turning it. Turn the syntax of a phrase, turn the layout of a line, turn up or down the register of a speech. Turn some scenes into images, as two of the earliest surviving *Aeneid* manuscripts (the *Vergilius Vaticanus* and the *Vergilius Romanus*, both from about the fifth century) did; let the reader turn to the image, to rest and reconsider. Turn the poem, turn out the poem, turn and turn it again, to keep the poem in circulation, to keep its blood flowing.

There once was a person who created a fly, and that fly killed flies, and it made the city free from flies, except for his fly. There once was a person who created a poem, and the words of that poem broke free and reformed into other poems. And this is the way that flies die, and cities thrive; and it is also the way that poems live and thrive.

Chris Piuma

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BOOK I —
SHIPWRECK

As the action begins in the Aeneid, Juno rouses the winds to a great storm out of her enduring rage at Aeneas and the remnants of Troy. Aeneas watches in terror as his fleet breaks up in the waves and rocks.

1. *Aeneae solvuntur frigore membra*

Clouds snatch sun from the sky.
Dark night reigns over all
creased by thunder
and lightning – all things threaten
the men with instant death.

Aeneas gets scared.
Limbs loosened in fear, he
groans, bends over and
pukes over the boat's
edge. "Why" he says
"couldn't I have met death
on Trojan soil, poured out
my soul by your sword,
Diomedes, alongside Hector
and all the others...?"

He talks that way while
waves hang them
high in the air

opening pockets of earth
they swing over—the south wind
twists three ships onto
hidden rocks and right before
Aeneas' eyes surges a huge wall
of water

 hurling
the pilot headlong
over the side

 a vast whirlpool
churns and men scatter
swimming in the abyss, mingled with
weapons treasure and broken
 bits of ship

Then Neptune catches wind of it.
Calling all storms, he
orders them to stop
 right now.

Just like when a riot breaks out
and the rabble rage drunk on
their own anger—stones
and fire fly, madness making
weapons of whatever's
ready to hand—then
if they behold a man
moving among them with
quiet dignity, they fall
silent and stand close,
pricking up their ears—

 just so
Neptune calms the whole hubbub
of waves, routs the clouds and brings back
the sun, lifts the ships and
smooths the seas.

2. *aequora tuta silent*

Aeneas pokes his head out once things grow calm.
His weary men straggle along the shore, turn
inwards to Libya. There's a long inlet
where reefs strike out forming a harbor
waves break on either side of
huge crags that threaten the sky
but inside the sea, protected, lies still
so that
from high above it looks like the topmost
layer of trees gently waving in wind.
Here the broken ships stagger
unable to tie fast anywhere
seven vessels remain of the whole fleet
they disembark eagerly kissing land
and wringing their soaking limbs out on shore
Achates strikes sparks to catch fire
snatches up flame in shavings
then those tired guys carry down
wave-spoiled grain, whatever fruits
and tools they can salvage and prepare to

chop up the food and cook it
for groaning bellies

Aeneas, shipwrecked and separated from most of his men, wanders in the woods outside of Carthage. Venus, his mother, decides to put on a disguise and help him find his way.

3. *O dea certe*

His mother comes down to the woods to meet him,
disguised as a Spartan maid armed to the teeth.
She's slung a bow over her shoulder like a huntress,
and her hair hangs free in the wind, legs
bare at the knee, where she's tied a knot
in her dress. "Hey," she says, "you guys—
did you happen to see any of my sisters,
wearing quivers and spotted lynx hides, shouting
after a boar spewing foam on the path?"
So Venus speaks, and her son replies:
"No. I haven't seen or heard anyone like that.
But who are you? Not human, surely.
You're a goddess. Or sister to the sun. Or—
a nymph, maybe? Whoever you are, please
bless us with some information. Let us know

where on earth we are. Because honestly,
we have no clue. We're shipwrecked here.
I swear, I'll go straight to your altar and make
a giant sacrifice!" Venus says, "Well,
I'm hardly worthy of *that*.
All the women here dress this way, with quivers
and purple bound up high on their calves.
What you see is the Phoenician realm; the Tyrians,
and Agenor's city. But these are the borders
of Libya—a people tough in war.
Dido, having fled her brother in Tyre, is in charge.

It's a long story...

But I'll give you the gist of it.
Dido's husband was Sychaeus, richest guy in Phoenicia,
but sick in love with her. Ever since she was a girl
she'd been promised to him in marriage.
But her brother held Tyre—Pygmalion,
wickedest man that ever was.
He went crazy. And blind, with love of gold.
One night he lured Sychaeus out to the altars
and killed him there in cold blood—
some brotherly love! Worse, he mocked Dido
with false hope, feigning grief.
But the ghost of her unburied husband
floated up in her sleep, raising its white face
in a marvelous way, letting her know what
happened, showing her where the sword
had gone through out front of the altars. *Run,*
he told her. *Get out of the country, fast.*
To help he explained where she could find
hidden treasure, a massive horde of silver and gold.

Dido woke up to the danger and rallied her friends,
who'd hated or feared the tyrant all along.
Finding ships ready to go, they loaded them up
and took off. So they got away

and ripped off Pygmalion in the process...

and a woman arranged the whole thing.

They landed here, where you can see the giant walls
of New Carthage springing up.

But what about you? Where did you come from?
Where are you going?"

Aeneas sighs.

He drags his voice out dramatically:

"O goddess, we could stand here all day talking,
and I still couldn't do the story justice.

We're what's left of Troy—if you've ever
heard of it—storm-driven

pell-mell, hither and yon to Libyan shores.

I'm one of the good guys—Aeneas—who
rescued household gods from the enemy,
known all the way up in heaven.

My blood's from Jove, and I seek Italy.

I set out with 20 ships, doing just as my mother,
a goddess, told me. Scarcely

seven remain, shattered by wind and waves.

Lost and needy, I wander the Libyan deserts,
driven from Europe and Asia. I—"

But Venus can bear it no more.

She cuts him off mid-sigh, saying, "Whoever
you are, the gods can't hate you all *that* much.

You're still breathing, and you've made it this far.

Go to the queen. I'm telling you,

your friends and your fleet are safe,

or I don't know augury.

See those swans—two groups of them,

broken up a minute ago by Jove's eagle?

Now some of them in a long line look down

at the others, alighted on land, sporting

there with their wings while their friends

flock and sing in the sky. Likewise,

your ships and men either hold the port
or sail in easily now... Go.
Wherever the road leads, that's the way."
After she speaks, she turns away.
Her cheeks and neck glow, and the sweetest smell
comes from her hair, while her dress falls
to her feet—no one can doubt
 she's a goddess.