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Aeneas

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I.

The childhood of Aeneas is obscure—
no birth certificate; but we can be sure
he was the bastard son of a goddess,
one made of sea-foam, seed of Ouranos,
domiciled in Paphos, Cythera, and Olympus
(the Greek one, not the one nearby in Cyprus).

Anchises must have had a nice surprise
when he put down his flute and the “princess”
who’d given him such pleasure nine months earlier
(still recognizable though her hair was curlier
and she’d put on a different dazzling dress)
was standing there, her arms behind her, “Guess
which hand I’ve got your present in?” “The right,
for luck, it must be.” “Well, you are half right.”
Then she produced the baby, quickly kissed
his open mouth, and disappeared into a glowing mist,
taking the baby with her. Five years later
she brought the boy back to his Trojan pater.

We must suppose she hadn’t suckled him
with her immortal milk. They say a nymph
mothered the child, since Aphrodite kept
moving from bed to bed and hardly slept
with anyone twice. He probably felt loved,
as a cousin of King Priam (once removed),
and being, like his father, rather handsome;
but one imagines he was often glum,
often alone, a puzzling woodland boy
lost in the urbane palaces of Troy,
with, you might say, hardly a family life,

since this Anchises hadn't got a wife.
 In some debate on the best open-air
 amusement he had mentioned his affair,
 and boasted he'd been Aphrodite's rider
 upon the soft green meadows of Mount Ida.
 This went down very badly on Olympus:
 crash! And he joined the goddess' court of limpers.

II.

Unsure about his nature (was he human,
 not having been brought up by any woman?),
 Aeneas married one of Priam's girls
 (he seemed to have a thing about her curls).
 Creusa put him straight about the things
 that Homer hides between his lyre strings.
 She was a real princess. They had a child.

Then Helen happened, and the world went wild.
 Only Aeneas seemed to be immune
 to beauty obviously far too human.
 The old men thought she was worth fighting for.
 Worth Hector's death, the siege, ten years of war?
 Odysseus sliding with his élite force
 down the umbilical cord of the wooden horse
 like drops of TNT? The burning city?
 He was protected there by Aphrodite
 who held his hand—but just to stop him killing
 her real favorite, her half-niece Helen.
 “Go home,” she said, “save your son; save that loser”
 (Anchises); “save yourself.” He lost Creusa—
 it seemed his mother never cared for her.

III.

Next time they met was in Tunisia
 (Anchises having died, without a word

from her, after so many pleasures shared) . . .
Our hero'd landed. Suddenly she was there,
radiant, looking like a teenager
in hunting gear. She asked him to assist her
(pretending she was looking for her sister),
but when she moved away, after some talk,
he knew his mother by her swaying walk.
“Why do you hide yourself like this? Why tease
your *son* with borrowed clothes, and false identities?
Are we forbidden to meet without disguise,
to speak in our own voices, without lies?
And can't you take my hand, give me a kiss?
Why must you look as young as Artemis,
younger than me?” he shouted after her.
No answer drifted back through Libyan air
as she zoomed out to Paphos. But she bestowed
a cloud on him, for cover on the road
to Carthage, a new city to the west.

Seemingly no-one noticed that a mist
was walking through the desert into town.
He could see out, but builders looking down
from roofs, and the Phoenicians in the street,
saw nothing odd. So on he went to meet
Queen Dido in her brand-new palace, where
the useful cloud was timed to disappear.
And she'd another trick, his distant mother:
Aeneas' son was sent for, but his brother
(Eros, the eternal child) arrived instead,
and sitting on the queen's soft lap, he played
his age-old game against her pliant breast.
For Aphrodite wanted not just rest
in Carthage for her tired Trojan son;
she wanted him to stay, not soldier on.
(“This woman comes from the Levant, like you.
Take her. Forget that dream about a New
Troy to be built in Italy. They've built here

already all you need—a theatre,
 law-courts and baths. Forget that tale of Rome.
 Start a new family and make Carthage home.”)

We know she failed: love, yes; but “Go to Rome”
 again commanded, by the Olympian crier;
 deception of the queen; her home-made pyre;
 his sailing and her suicide with his sword;
 his visit to the underworld; his word
 and all the things he wished to say ignored—
 she fled among the ghosts, an enemy.

IV.

Up from the world that’s under Italy
 and under Europe, under everywhere,
 rejoicing in the sunlight, birds and air,
 he sees the upper Italy’s occupied
 already. As his vessels smoothly glide
 north in the moonlight, he can tell the shore
 belongs to Circe (now Odysseus’ whore?)
 or to the Greeks or some Ausonian tribe
 he’ll have to marry into or else bribe
 before he lays a stone of his new city.
 If he can’t marry into property,
 they’ll have to fight. He thinks he’s had enough
 of travel, battle, certainly of love.
 Two wives—well, Dido nearly was a wife—
 will keep him mourning till the end of life.

But he’s a man of duty. When they meet
 the king of Latium and his rather sweet
 daughter Lavinia, he accepts her hand;
 and realises much too late, that hand
 was promised earlier to a local man,
 Turnus. Aeneas knows his mother can
 make Turnus fall for someone else instead—

but will she? She was furious that he hadn't said
goodbye to Dido; but a god must know
when the gods tell you go, you have to go,
even without a word. He hopes that Venus
as they say here (strange that it rhymes with penis)
will not abandon him because his fate
forced him to leave poor Dido desolate.

V.

His mother, meantime, worried about war.
The threat of it was darkening the air.
And she remembered finding her son's sword
and shield gone rusty from his months aboard
this ship or that, the leathers of the armor
fraying, the helmet like a colander.

She wandered, swaying, to her husband's bed:
"Vulcan" (her dress fell off), "Vulcan," she said
as he woke up, "Vulcan, my dear, I wonder
if you could—oh, that's nice—delay the thunder
that Zeus has ordered—yes, dear Vulcan, *there*—
and—oh, you're strong—do me—oh!—could you bear
to do me—a small favor—yes, go on
like that—a favor for your Trojan son,
I mean your stepson, after all you've done
for Thetis and the Greeks. Oh, Vulcan! What
have you been reading, you inventive . . . god!
Do it again! I mean, Aeneas needs
fresh armor and fresh—what a lot of seed!"
"I'll sleep on it," he mutters, "Mmmm—I'll make
weapons for anyone, but for your sake
they will be new, miraculous, and safe."

And so they were, with scenes worked in relief
of famous victories and scenes of peace
on the new metal of the shield; Achilles

had nothing grander on that shield of his.
 But, to Aeneas, better than all this,
 she brings herself, and offers him a kiss,
 unasked, and putting down the shining arms
 under an oak-tree, folds him in her arms.

At last he turns to what his mother brought,
 gear for the battles which must soon be fought.
 He sees, not understanding, on the shield
 a wolf and babies, ships, a battlefield,
 elephants on some mountains, geese on hills,
 and lions chasing people in walled ovals,
 a woman being bitten by a snake,
 a wild man with the odd name Alaric,
 buildings with crosses on them, crucified
 slaves, and men with a ring above their head . . .

Then to the shoulders where his father rode
 from Troy, he lifts the future and the fate of Rome.

VI.

They fought. They fought, day after day; and some
 hundreds of men daily did not come home.
 Above it all the father of gods and men
 said none of the gods must interfere again
 as they had done at Troy: "Leave them alone.
 Aeneas must kill Turnus on his own."
 Aeneas did have help, invisibly
 supplied by Venus, Cretan dittany
 to heal a wound, an accidental arrow
 shot through the mêlée from an unknown bow,
 when he was still unarmed in a short truce.

For Turnus, in a speech full of abuse
 of Trojan thieves of other people's wives,
 had tried to spare the waste of further lives

by calling for a duel: this would prove
who was more worthy of Lavinia's love,
and incidentally hand on Latium
to the next ruler, who'd be king of Rome.
He too was helped, but he did realize
that he was helped: his sister in disguise
brought him their father's sword, made by the same
divine artificer whom here they name
Vulcan or Mulciber. But which would yield
if Vulcan's sword was swung at Vulcan's shield
was never tested, for Aeneas held
a spear, which he could throw; and when he threw
that spear it split the bullhide shield, passed through
Turnus' thick thigh, and pinned him to the ground.
It was a serious but not fatal wound,
and Turnus asked for pity; but he wore
a sword-belt he'd won earlier in the war,
torn from the body of Aeneas' friend.
Aeneas saw, enraged, and put an end
to oratory with a roar and one last blow,
and Turnus' soul went where we all must go.

VII.

Sailing into success can make you queasy,
almost sea-sick. He didn't find it easy
to call his mother Venus; she did not
come to the wedding; and the marriage knot
kept him awake at night. Lavinia never
mentioned her childhood sweetheart, but whenever
his name came up, she blushed and turned away.
Something was wrong. One day he took a swim
near home in the Numicus and the nymph
(Anna Perenna) put one arm around
his neck and touched his lips: he thought he'd found
again his happy childhood, and was drowned
embracing the absent woman of his life,

the mother in heaven, the annihilated wife,
the missing sister of the Libyan shore,
even Dido's Anna, the good sister-in-law,
and thinking as he sank through the dark water,
"I never had a sister or a daughter."

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