

University of Canberra

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Inquiry

Biographical note:

Paul Magee is the author of *From here to Tierra del Fuego* (University of Illinois Press: 2000) and *Cube root of book* (John Leonard Press: 2006). He is working on two books, the first a theory of questions (*Poetry and knowledge*), the second in verse (*Chapter twelve*). Paul teaches poetry at the University of Canberra, where he is an Associate Professor. He has published on psychoanalysis, Marxian thought, epistemology and aesthetics.

1

She had run, you see, snipping her thread and
hit hard, loud.

Arguing loud, her husband and she
till she ran out of time.

A woman who died at Belconnen mall
by leaping three floors down the atrium
to the children at Santa's feet
saw a bit too much to make it.

The radio asked witnesses,
of a certain incident, to come forward
for "counselling this afternoon".

The inquiring mind is a hardened frame
around a memory of trauma,
everything slows to a still,
you see the connections on its eyeballs.

I'm assuming a moment in which she changes her mind.

How else to receive her gift?

even if it isn't.

I buried the ear, but it keeps transmitting a presence.

2

Germanton, in 1914
needing a name change
now has a submarine
ninety metres long
emerging from the main-street view;
and is Holbrook
Country New South Wales.

It's painted the pitch of night
at a hundred metres underwater.
Holbrook's sub hit ground
in the Dardanelles, the sky
a rain of missiles above
and the air running out in fear.
Submerged in a dusty park

on a street wide enough for drays,
dwindling locals –
at a hundred metres above sea level
one hundred kilometres
inland, his craft floats
through this tiny, passing town forever saying
we'll probably die here.

3

The first to check the charging Trojan force
and not for long, was a Rutulian,
Sucro, who took a sword-blow to his side.
Aeneas hacked the basket of his chest.
Turnus hurled Amycus and his brother
Diores from their horses, then jumped down
to spear the former who was coming back
for him. Diores he stabbed dead by sword.
Then he cut off their heads, so as to hang
them from his chariot, dewy with blood.
In one fight Aeneas killed Tanais,
Talos, Cethegus and sad Onites
(Perida's son, from Thebes), who died in grief.
Turnus likewise culled two from Patara,
that Lycian town which Apollo loves,
plus Menoetes, who had despised war
when a young man, in Arcady, fishing
his living from the banks of the Lerna,
so far from the burdens you're forced to bear
as a great man's client, staying humbly
there at home on his father's rented land.
Like huge fire brands thrown into a forest:
the laurels within crack as they catch light,
or seething rivers, which suddenly flood
and smash out from a sheer mountain and charge
the fields and plains, Aeneas and Turnus
devastating everything in their path

and now the rage within them is a wave
bursting through warriors with no knowledge
of what it is to be conquered, hacking
down men with extraordinary strength.
Aeneas shook Murranus — who used to boast
that the fathers of his great-grandfathers
were Latin kings — from his perch to the ground
and plunged a massive boulder down on him.
Tangled in reins, he fell under the yoke
of his chariot, its horses trampled
their master with blow upon massive blow
till the wheels clambered over. While Turnus
met Hyllus's shouting attack in hurling
the spear that was to pierce that gold helmet
and stick in his brain. Crethus was bravest
of the Greeks but couldn't snatch his life back
from Turnus. Nor could the high Sabine Gods
save Cupencus their priest from Aeneas.
Not even the bronze barrier of his
round shield. His breast offered up to the sword.
While you, Aeolus, fell on Latin fields
whose earth covered you over, even though
whole phalanxes of Greeks couldn't stop you
and Achilles, that ruiner of kings
— of Priam — could never stop you back then.
Death hit its mark in Italy. Your home
was up there in Lyrnesus, Mount Ida
up above Troy, and your grave is so far.
Everyone was front-line, every Latin,
each and every Trojan: keen Serestus,

the horse-breaker Messapus, Mnestheus,
dauntless Asilas, all the Greek squadrons
gifted by Evander, the Etruscans,
men warring to the edge of their strength
hurling themselves at the desolate fight.
But now his gorgeous mother suggested
into Aeneas's thoughts pour all force
suddenly upon the Latin city
walls confuse our enemies with their loss.
Keenly looking all around as he ran
hunting through the fighting lines for Turnus,
Aeneas grasped that the city was free
of the fearsome killing, resting in peace.
The incendiary thought of extending
the conflict spread through his veins, he called in
Mnestheus, Sergestus and Serestus,
his chiefs. The army closed in on the mound
he then seized and spoke from, their shields and spears
held ready: "Move the moment I tell you.
God is behind us, don't dawdle thinking
it's a sudden plan. I'll smash that city
down — they caused this war — and its civilians
will have to beg to be slaves to stop us.
I'll level all to the ground. To ashes.
Tell me: I'm to wait till Turnus pleases
to come out here and face me man-to-man?
He stinks of defeat. That city's the brains
in this disgusting war. Bring fire on clubs
right now! and burn the covenant to Hell!"
Each outdoes the other, packing themselves

into a wedge for hurling at the wall.
Scaling ladders come up from nowhere, flames.
Some of the Trojans then run to the gates
hacking to death those outside. Others throw
so many spears the land's speckled with shade.
Among the first men there was Aeneas,
stretching his right hand out, and now hurling
accusation at Latinus, calling
Gods out to witness them again compelled
to war, the king has twice turned enemy,
this treaty the second that he's broken.
Within the restless citizens discord.
Some of them order the bolts drawn, wanting
to drag their own king outside of the walls
for treaty talks. Others, carrying arms,
are going to defend him with violence.
They are like bees a shepherd has tracked down
to a crevice in rock and gassed with smoke,
agitated as to what's in their camp,
scouring its walls of wax, and now honing
their rage in on one loud hum. The palace
sends out gloomy black fumes, the sky's acrid,
the sound of walls — they're collapsing inside.
That broken people then flinched to the core
with yet another grief: on the palace
rooftop their queen had spied the enemy
approaching, seen the walls breached and the flames
— but no Rutulian fighters in sight,
and when she realized Turnus too was gone
decided he'd died fighting, desperate

woman, and thought-disordered, was screaming
out she caused it all was the blame the root
of it and many other words like these
deliriously, then at her thought's edge
tore her purple toga, and with her hands
fixed a hideous knot on a high beam.
The pitiable Latins take this in.
The queen's eldest daughter Lavinia
rips out patches of her flower-like hair,
the mob of citizens is insane, screams
now can be heard from every temple,
she lacerates her rosy-coloured cheeks.
Report of their queen spread, everyone heard
and hearing, lost the spirit to fight on.
His wife stunned King Latinus with her end.
Dressed in a ripped shirt he walked the ruins,
hands fouling his ancient grey hair with dust.
Far away on the plain, Turnus meanwhile
pursued the stragglers that remained, tiring
steadily; he'd lost the joy of the fight.
The wind then bore the shouting to him, gloom
confusion and cheerless din — blind terrors
got in his ears. Why are people screaming?
What's happening back there, within the walls?
How can I hear from so far? He wrenched the
reins from his driver and then stopped. Goddess
Juturna his sister was the one in
Turnus's charioteer Metiscus
who had been handling those reins so well. Through
his lips she now suggests, "Let's pursue them

out here, where victory has favoured us.
Other bodies can defend the city.
Aeneas attacks us there; we, out here
will heap death upon them, give no mercy.
They've no more men than us and you won't hide
from glory." Turnus replied, "I knew you
in Camers, sister, when he stirred us up
against the treaty — your whole heart was there
and you don't fool me now either, Goddess
though you are. But what God of Olympus
wanted you to play this horrible role?
So you could see your brother die slowly?
What can I do about it now? What chance
spin of Fate will grant me some more of life?
No-one's more dear to me than Murranus.
I saw him with my own eyes calling out
and I saw that enormous fighter die
of an huge wound. Ufens also sadly
has died — to avoid the sight of me, shamed?
The Trojans possess our weapons and hoard
our corpses — what else remains? To endure
our homes ripped from their foundations? Drancis
crowned prophet? Not proved by me a liar?
Should I flee? Will the world see Turnus's
back? But is it really so bad to die?
Be kind, spirits of the dead, those up here
have turned away. I carry you a soul
that is virtuous, that never took flight,
is throughout worthy of its ancestors."
He spoke. Just then through the enemy lines

a horse bearing Saces flew, arrow wound
full in the man's face, who threw himself down
at Turnus' feet to beg his leader,
"Turnus, you have their welfare in your hands,
have pity on your people. Aeneas
strikes lightning with his sword, is threatening
to cast the palace to the ground ruined.
The torches' flames carry up to our rooves.
Latins turn their faces to you, we beg.
The king is lost in thoughts of Trojan sons
-in-law, mutters about the marriages
to which we'll resort. And besides all this. . .
She was so faithful to your cause, our queen
has fallen, from her own hand, and has died.
So terrified, she fled from this Earth's light.
All by themselves, at the gates, Messapus
and Atinas the keen, sustain our line.
Soldiers in close formation stand around
them on all sides, a vast crop of iron,
while you wander here on the empty plains."
This constantly shifting picture struck him
speechless, Turnus stared out blankly ahead,
a massive sense of the disgrace in him
boiling, and in that same heart frenzy, grief,
agitated love for Lavinia
sent by the vengeful Furies, and courage
that knows the force of right, all fought and seethed.
But once this light with its shadows figured
again, Turnus wrenched his burning eyeballs
out of their stare, and from his chariot

looked back at the Latin city, wildly.
A whirlwind of flames was rising, grasping
story by story of the wheeled tower
which he had coaxed beam by beam into shape
and finished off with runners and gangways.
“It’s time, sister, Fate has spoken. It’s time.
Don’t delay me any more. Let me go
where God and my stern destiny now call.
It’s decided: I will fight Aeneas
alone. However cruelly soon I die
this matter is resolved, and I’ll bear it.
You won’t see anything to bring you shame
again from Turnus, sister. Let me burn,
before I’m to die, in one last, mad rush.”
Leaping from their chariot, the hero
abandoned her to race over the fields
run straight into a rain of spears and smash
through the middle of the Trojan ranks like
a rock from a summit falling headlong
— a hurricane has plucked it up, storm hurled
it or it’s just worn from its perch, driving
uncontrollably any which way down,
and it bounds over the ground in joy now
gathering up branches, implements, men.
Thus, through the ranks the shattered Turnus rushed
at the walls. The earth there is streaming blood,
air creaking with the shafts of spears. A sign
for silence, and with massive voice Turnus
shouts: “Hold the peace, Rutulians. Latins,
weapons at your side. The battle is mine

to win or to lose. I alone command
the right to take revenge on your behalf
for the treaty they broke. We will settle
by the truth of our swords.” All now stand back
making space for Aeneas and Turnus.

Virgil Aeneid XII, 505-696

(translated from the text in Williams 1973: 149-55)

4.

Guilty at not returning those CDs
which I listened to strangely
in the life that followed,
one year on I decided to
return them to a public library
the shelf of souls in circulation
dead books and arias of divas
unrevived until they're played.
I couldn't say why they felt so guilty being Murray's,
who was dead anyway.
I placed them in the chute.
I'd borrowed them from him a week before
he – not died but suicided. The two things
just don't seem the same.
Till this morning a voice loaned me its death
to steal away – Montserrat Caballé,
her darkest heights from Handel through
Verdi, those never returning notes –
it never occurred to me that they were his gift.

Works cited

Williams, RD (ed) 1973 *The Aeneid of Virgil, Books 7-12*, Hampshire: St Martins Press