

John Poch

The Shield of Aeneas

— *No words can tell its power.*

So Virgil's fatal anthem
glorifies the soldier
who holds (but cannot fathom)
the art before his shoulder.

He bows to Vulcan's violence
as he must. After the gore
always the peace, a silence
where boredom longs for war.

Or this reprieve where the God
of the forge can foretell Vandals
and Goths on the bronze façade
with his blowtorch and anvils,

the bloody Roman glory
for the illiterate.
The picture tells the story
of men. Consider it.

Begin with, blank as a clock,
the face. We start at twelve,
the mountain peak, a tock
is ticked and midnight felled

where God's own eagle plucks
the liver from the thief
of fire. The blood's the crux.
It falls like a red leaf.

But note this hero can-
not die. While others do
the dying for him, pan
across the carnage. Cue

the anti-heroes, emphatic
as Cain or Herod, obscene
as Rambo, cinematic,
produced by Harvey Weinstein.

When Abel's slain by fate,
we blame the blessed given:
Adam's stupid fruit
of knowing . . . and then the women.

By three fifteen the Middle
East falls. Tears fall where laughter
rose. Barrel bombs riddle
Damascus: no answer after.

No nucleus in chaos,
the refugees now scatter,
the coyotes betray us,
and kings say what's the matter.

The wounded flee by boat
to Italy, Greece, or Ireland,
America where the redcoat
still believes the tyrant.

My father there in brambles
lost like Dante, warning
me through bad examples,
is he praying or just mourning?

The art upon the shield
is, we now realize,
our simple fears revealed
on gold we fantasize.

That doesn't mean it's fake.
Imagination can make
a world to undertake
the city, the faults, the quake.

John Poch

So make an icon of
this aegis, upon its gleam
imagine scoring, the love
of a college football team.

Flip the remote control,
two lovers in the corner
abiding rock-n-roll,
the slow-dance to Foreigner.

If only all were enshrouded
within some monstrous Chevy
Bel Air interior, clouded,
the silver lining heavy.

But those affairs are merely
memories. Or Maud Gonne —
they never happened. Cavalierly,
you drank and skipped the prom.

So what can shock your rivals,
what picture would you show them
to terrify? Your idols,
a line from an ancient poem?

A military parade,
our modern golden calf.
This camouflage charade
as subtle as a giraffe.

War is a chameleon.
Don't call it homicide.
When death is by the million,
the truth is classified.

How could you not believe,
old friend, Iscariot?
The silver up your sleeve.
Some trust in the chariot.

At the hub of the wheel of the shield
an emptiness, the sea,
expanse of fear, until
the Statue of Liberty,

her verdigris and charm,
a certain slant of torch,
to the West her Eastern arm
invites all to the porch

of freedom. Done with the sea,
unlost, at least you hope.
Move inland, south, free,
where slavery's telescope

spies strangest fruit in the trees,
Atlanta's architecture
burned, half a million dead
to give the shield some texture

upon the lower edges.
The look of a beehive
smoking. Below, the pledge is:
We were not born to survive,

only to live: engraved
in English that no one behold
or grasp or know but the grave
and the god of the underworld.

These are the images
upon the shield, some gold,
some silver finishes,
some vague because foretold.

Why for the soldier a scene
in the first place? Why not
a shield as young and plain
as Helenor, whose plot

John Poch

seems never finished, his end
we never see. Not so
with Lycus, his close friend:
three similes to show

his brutal death at the hands
of Turnus. He's a hare,
a swan, a lamb from the pens,
his mother bleating a prayer.

Some die anonymous,
some end up on a shield.
Some rage, some merely fuss,
some buried in a field.

All for the good. The art
is for Aeneas's pride.
Not to protect his heart,
but for the viewers outside:

this battlefield evil
who swings the pendulum
though it swings us, woeful
one way, or adrenaline.

Adopt the odd perspective
from just behind the shield,
and smell the blood, subjective,
the corpses in the field.

Embrace misfortune, twist
and know defensive power,
the hidden straps hold wrist
and arm, can't tell the hour,

for no such thing as time
exists for warriors
caught up, thrown down in their prime
in battle, glorious

in moments of the fight
where the shield makes shadow holy
and darkness is the light
or death. An old story:

love duty, not love, and pleasure
of slaughter well done. The dust
will be dusted and ashes treasure
the fire to come. They must.

Lift up your arms, Aeneas,
and worship Fate, your Lord.
Ruined, inspired by Venus,
move forward, draw your sword.