

2020 Classical Literature Scholarship—2nd Place

Danni Chesler

New Directions from an Old Classic

My first reading of the *Aeneid* began in a waiting room of the radiology department at the Orem Instacare. I was sitting in front of a table covered in the three-month-old magazines meant to keep people from getting impatient, my mom next to me scrolling through Facebook to pass the time, and a black book in my hands that I had just received a day earlier. In order to keep up with my assigned reading for the night, I opened up the book. The rest of my day was consumed by nurses with needles, waiting for surgery, and some 2,000 year-old poetry mixed in. At the end of the day, I had to get my appendix removed. This being my very first surgery, the recovery was something that I was quite unprepared for.

Waking up the next morning, I was greeted by new pains and weaknesses. No longer could I sleep on my side, which still has left its mark on me to this day, I quickly discovered that laughing didn't bring the same joy as before, medication was constantly being slid down my throat, and walking was more of a burden than a mode of transport. While I was sleeping away my days at home, my wonderful teacher, who had given me the *Aeneid*, posted his own thoughts online for our class on a specific line in the first book: "Endure, and save yourselves for happier times" (1.244 trans. Lombardo). With just seven words, my suffering and pain made sense. My future was not bleak, it was full of light and hope. There was a reason to hold on and keep going because I knew that life would be better if I endured through it.

Thankfully overtime my stomach pains subsided, laughing brought happy tears to my eyes, sleeping was less of a hassle in terms of what position I was in, and I walked at my leisure again. Little did I know that only 8 months later I would have to pick up that book again, not for school, but for my own comfort and sanity.

On August 31, 2017, I tore my ACL. A common yet very problematic injury because I was a starting varsity soccer player with an entire team of girls who needed me on that field to fight for every ball that came my way. I was not ready to turn my back on those who depended on me. I didn't know the exact diagnosis until after 6 excruciatingly long days full of scans and tests to figure out why my knee had decided to give out on me. The day after I found out, I shuffled into my coach's office and just broke down. After revealing the tragic news to him, he invited me to gather my emotions for the first period of school by hiding away in his office.

While my math class was learning how to factor equations, I was taken back to when I had found solace in the stories of a man much before my time. Out of my backpack came the *Aeneid* and I began with the famous phrase *Arma virumque cano*. A new set of fateful words then stood out to me. Resting at the end of Vergil's innovation to the Muses, he said, "So hard and huge a task it was to found the Roman people" (1.48-49 trans. Fitzgerald). It wasn't easy for Aeneas to establish a people so far from his original home. He had to face multiple wars, the dangers of the sea, and losing those he loved most. My life from here on out was going to consist of a knee surgery and recovery that was not going to be easy. I knew I was going to be okay, because at the end of the day I would be a better person because of my trials.

To this day the *Aeneid* has forever pointed my life in a new direction. From Aeneas' story and Vergil's words, I learned how to endure through my struggles and understand what life looks like after. There was a point to the adversities I experienced, and I was comforted to know that I could be even better on the other end of them. I am eternally grateful to whatever force placed the *Aeneid* in my path because without it, I would be a slave to my trials instead of the master.