

Virgil's *Aeneid* Book II tells of how the ancient city of Troy was destroyed. Laocoön, a Trojan priest, warned the Trojans not to trust the infamous wooden horse – 'Beware of Greeks bearing gifts' – but died for his efforts, killed by the gods who supported the Greeks.

timeo Danaos et dona ferentis

[Gold morning light up on one side of an intimate stage space. A desk and a chair at one side, the only illuminated side. At the desk sits VIRGIL, our unwitting 'chorus-cum-narrator': a young-faced, harassed-looking man in his late thirties whose hair is already beginning to thin and who already has the fussy, pedantic air better suited to an elderly academic. He stretches, picks up his pen with an audible sigh. He has procrastinated enough, writing letters and such, and now it is time to return to work. He settles down to begin to read over what he has already done.]

VIRGIL:

[Reading aloud, crossing out and revising as he goes.]

'... Hurling it into the sea or setting... setting fire to it... as some trick of the Greeks and not to be... trusted...'

[Deep red light up on the opposite side of the stage, which has remained in darkness until now. Throughout, when one side of the stage is lit up, the other is in semi-darkness, a give-and-take procedure, only the speaker/active party illuminated. On a low wooden stool sits LAOCOON, a priest, wearing dark red robes. Watches VIRGIL, who is as unaware of his presence throughout as he would be of a spirit.]

LAOCOON:

The poet writes some excellent lines. Just listen to him. He's a genius. He knows he's a genius, though his voice is quiet and his manner modest. He knows this will last far beyond his lifetime. He has created us, we subjects for his songs. He has rescued us from myth. But look, here I come. Here is my part now. I wish he wouldn't speak it. But he will. *[tiredly]* Of course he will.

VIR:

[Standing up, walking round in his lit-up space, reading/reciting.]

'In a great temper Laocoön came tearing down from the citadel,
Crying from far: --
Citizens, are you all stark mad?
Do you really believe our foes are gone?'

LAO:

[So disgusted at the memory, which is still so strong, that he is provoked, unwillingly, into speech.]

Look, they all called, look at Laocoön, running down like a youth. Some laughed, but you could see that it was only to cover their fright. After all, how often does Neptune's priest come thundering down the slopes like a rolling boulder, knocking all and sundry out of its path?

[Speaks faster, but still rhythmically, almost as if reciting a well-known verse.]

And I was, as he says, I was tearing down, running, as I hadn't since my sons were toddlers and I had had to chase them to stop them wandering away, but now they chased me, shouting as I ran and ran and felt the

stones slide beneath my thin soles that were not meant for anything but temple duties. There were more people behind me now, the curious or the worried who had come out of the gates to see what was going on. I don't know how many, hundreds perhaps. It doesn't matter.

I reached the crest of the beach and saw that thing, that monstrous swollen-bellied horse with its hollow hewn eyes and cloven hooves, its carved lips drawn back from its carved teeth in a vicious grin. I let out a strangled shout and somehow I slipped on the pale stones, on the loose gravel, and nearly lost my footing. I nearly went sprawling. My son Antiphas, only eight years old and serious as an old man, had already caught up to me.

[bitterly] He would have been an excellent little athlete.

He steadied me and said with that fair hair of his mother's ruffled like corn and stiffened by the salt wind: Father, what is it? I turned my eyes to a sky glowering as black as soil above a furious iron sea. The omens were clear. The unease of the wind, with that metallic scent to its sharp edge. The black-red of glistening entrails. In my dreams there were these things. The omens were clear. In the depths of the flickering altar fire I had seen Troy burn.

I tried to tell them. They would not listen.

VIR:

'You must never feel safe with the horse, Trojans.

Whatever it is, I distrust the Greeks, even when they come
with gifts.

Laocoon spoke: he put forth his strength, and spun his huge
great spear

At the flank of the monster, right into its belly's hollow frame.'

LAO:

[Mock-orating, fine gestures with hand:]

Hear and tell of the gasp of the crowd, Virgil, the collective moan of terror and the whispering and the grudging admiration from the gathered soldiers at such a fine throw. This is a gift from the gods, they thought, and the priest buries a spear in its blessed womb? It is sacrilege, from he who should be the holiest of us all. Tell, Virgil, how the womb of the creature resonated with moans and sighs too, a monstrous echo, a parody, the birth contractions for a hundred armed Greek soldiers. And, inside the horse, imagine this: my spear, shot clean through a man's foot, pinning him to the floor, and this man's friend, trembling, with his hand forced over his seatmate's mouth to stop him from screaming. Even if he had screamed – you, Trojans, you would have thought his scream that holy horse's monstrous whinny.

My people watched the horse as expectantly as sheep do the shepherd. The resonations died away. There was silence.

Laocoon's wrong, someone said, satisfied. Laocoon is paranoid, agreed someone else in an undertone. I stared round at them all, disbelieving, no, unwilling to believe their stupidity. Did they expect the Greeks to clamber out, to surrender of their own free will? Rip it open! I shouted. Tear the monstrous thing apart! It would collapse like rotten fruit; it would splinter and crack and spill out the maggots to be crushed. They swayed this way and that, unable to make up their slow minds. To disobey the high priest was unheard of. But equally, to destroy a gift from the gods...

And then that Greek, that Sinon, coming crawling out of the undergrowth like a dog, snivelling and pleading for his life, lies on his lips from the moment he opened his mouth, screwing up his face with false tears.

And you, Trojans. And you, standing in a ring, listening, spellbound, to his lies.

VIR:

'We gave him his life for those tears: they even aroused our
compassion.

Priam himself at once ordered the handcuffs to be struck off the fellow...'

LAO:

[Shakes head, disgust mixed with sorrow. Silent for a moment, then:]

When the Greek had finished bending the crowd's mind to his story and he stood there, snivelling, while my sons stared round-eyed at his wild beard and artfully torn clothing, silence fell. Then: Make a sacrifice, someone said. Make a sacrifice to purify the way for the horse. And the mob took up that refrain and chanted *Sacrifice, sacrifice, sacrifice*, until my ears rang with the word. Thymbraeus, little Thymbraeus, six years old and his brother's shadow, hid his face in my robe while Antiphas' hot fingers crept up to close hesitantly round mine. How I wish I had squeezed his hand, as his mother would have done. All right, I said, and I shouted it over a mob suddenly gone silent as death. All right, Trojans. You have demanded it. I shall make a sacrifice. And I did.

VIR:

'Laocoon, whom we'd elected by lot as Neptune's priest,
Was sacrificing a great bull at the official altar,
When from over the deep, from Tenedos, we saw –
Telling it makes me shudder –'

LAO:

[*With bitter humour*] It makes *you* shudder?
[*Wearily*] God, poet, must you? Do you really have to tell it again? I swear these must be your favourite lines, you've read them aloud so often.

[*Long stubborn pause in which VIRGIL remains frozen in his darkened space.*]

[*Giving up*] Oh, tell, then, poet, if it'll please you. [*Chin on hand, mock-engrossed*] So, tell. What did our poor damned trusting people see?

VIR:

'We saw twin snakes with immense coils
Thrusting the sea and together streaking towards the shore...'

LAO:

[*Leaning back on stool, studying VIRGIL.*]
... You know, I don't think I actually remember this. I don't know. When he was working on these lines and reworking them over and over, reading them out in the evening and then muttering them in his sleep... He gave me these images, what *must* have happened. I simply assimilated them and made them my memory. What I think is mine – the faces of my boys, the blood soaking the pale sand black – may be his invention. How much artistic license is he allowed with my life?
[*Laughs, almost a sob.*]
Gods know he doesn't need to invent problems for me.

VIR:

[*Happy with what he has done, proud of these lines, reading in fast undertone we cannot make out – he knows he doesn't need to correct anything here.*]

LAO:

The serpents, they were monstrous. They were monsters. They broke on to the shore, crashed out of the spume with a hiss like steam and coiled on the white beach in the surf, writhing, foot after foot of leathery black with flat scarlet heads and dull flat red eyes. You Trojans, you cowards, though I don't blame you, you scattered like leaves in the wind. In front of the great stone altar where the bull I had killed bled out – you were there, and then you were not. And oh, God, they'd been playing on the beach, I'd sent them away from the altar to allow me to perform the sacrifice in peace but I should have kept them by my side, I should have held them to me, she said, their mother said before she – that was what I should – oh, God, Thymbraeus, shrieking, screaming, a calf to the slaughter, and Antiphas, silent and white with terror, watching, just watching as the thing glided up to him. He must have been staring it straight in the eye. It made a deep worm furrow in the sand.

VIR:

‘Each snake knotted itself
Round the body of one of Laocoon’s small sons, hugging him
tight
In its coils, and bit the piteous flesh with its fangs.’

LAO:

[Almost weeping too, covering his face with one hand.]

Thrymbraeus was sobbing for me, Daddy, Daddy, kicking and thrashing like a fish in a net. Antiphas, blue eyes wide and bulging now, was silent and all there was was the hissing. Like swollen vipers the monsters were quick and with the suddenness of a viper’s strike up they came and down again, and down, and down... Oh, God. Oh, God, Antiphas. Thrymbraeus. I tried. I tried. Running on sand’s like running through water, like the nightmare where something awful will happen if I don’t manage to cleave my way through but for real now, in blade-sharp singing clear reality, but I was not tired, no I was not tired though my lungs hurt and my chest hurt and I tasted blood. I had my sword in my hand though I did not remember taking it, I was going to chop the black coils away from you, my boys, and it wasn’t too late, it couldn’t be too late. And then Thrymbraeus, he – you – the sobbing stopped. And as the thing left him I bellowed his name but then Antiphas too, you poor, wretched little thing – his fair head flopped to the side as if his neck had been broken and he died without saying a word, eyes wide open.
Like broken dolls. They lay in the surf like broken dolls, *things*, not mine at all.

[Speaking fast but no longer weeping, fast, fast, automaton.]

And then, of course, the black leathery sinew coiling round in iron embrace and the yellow fangs still gory with the blood of my children which didn’t hurt at all, really, as they pierced me, didn’t hurt at all – I roared to heaven my grief, my rage as the light dimmed and *you*, Trojans, you poor foolish sheeplike cowards. You watched me and the waves lap the bodies of eight-year-old Antiphas and six-year-old Thrymbraeus and you, you –
[Clenches fists on thighs] You did *nothing*.

VIR:

‘Then, my god! a strange panic crept into our people’s fluttering
Hearts: they argued Laocoon had got what he deserved
For the crime:
The sacrilege of throwing his spear at the wooden
Horse
And profaning its holiness with the stroke.’

LAO:

[Dully, getting up.] Tomorrow the poet will tell how the horse was taken inside, dragged inside and flowers thrown in its path. *[Anger fading to tired regret]* *Idiots*. Poor trusting religious idiots. And you know, what hurts the most isn’t that I or even my sons died pointlessly, but that all of you did, too.
[In a sarcastic Parthian shot as he leaves] Trite, isn’t it? It was true, though. Is true. Was. Is. I don’t know any more. But what I would say... What I would say, if I weren’t a *holy man*, would be that you all got what you deserved, too. For your crime.

[Lights down, sudden, black.]