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Agamemnon 2.0

by CHARLES L. MEE

Based on the play by Aeschylus

Darkness.

The earliest light of dawn.

A small campfire.

Silhouetted against the dawn light we see:

four men in long, floor-length gray coats—

Herodotus, a quadriplegic, in an old wooden wheel chair

Thucydides, a dwarf, or double amputee

Homer, blind, with round, wire-rimmed dark glasses

Hesiod, an epileptic; tremors run through his body from time to time for which he
must sometimes pause to bring them under control.

A long silence.

HERODOTUS

When I was a boy,
all this was open field.

HESIOD

There's some comfort
in the memory of it.

THUCYDIDES

If it's true.

HERODOTUS

I was here.
I know it to be true.

THUCYDIDES

What one remembers
and what is true
are so seldom the same.

HERODOTUS

These days,
even now,
you can look out from here
and know which of these farms
is recorded in the Domesday Book,
and which of them came later.

HESIOD [smoothing over the tension]

Once, on this familiar spot of ground,
walked other men and women,
as actual as we are today,
thinking their own thoughts,
feeling their own passions
now gone as utterly as we ourselves
shall be
like ghosts at cock crow.

[Homer steps forward out of the darkness,
the light catching his glasses.]

HOMER

One time
long ago
not far from here
the poet Simonides
was gathered with his friends
for dinner at a palace in the hills
across this valley.
Simonides stepped outside onto the terrace
for a moment
for a breath of air,
and in that moment
an earthquake
shook the villa
and brought it to the ground.
All Simonides' friends were crushed to death,
their bodies mangled and torn apart,
not even their own families could recognize them.

But Simonides could picture in his mind's eye
just where each one of his friends had been sitting,
and as he recalled them one by one
their bodies could be
pulled out from the rubble and identified.
And from this moment
came the beginning
of mankind's desire to remember
exactly
how the world has been
at one moment or another.

And so Simonides
instructed his friends
how to build their own palaces of memory,
how to build each room
how to furnish these rooms
with the faces and figures of their friends,
events of their lives,
their treasures,

books, poems,
each room given things of singular beauty
or distinctive ugliness,
to make them vivid
unforgettable
memories disfigured,
faces splashed with paint
or stained with blood
each moment suspended
in this geometry of memory, thought
and feeling.

HERODOTUS

Ten years ago,
the sons of Atreus
Agamemnon and Menelaus
left this spot
for Aulis
where they sailed for Troy
in search of Helen,
stolen from her husband Menelaus
and taken home to Troy by Paris.

HESIOD

Like any slave

THUCYDIDES

or piece of property.

HESIOD

It's a sort of love story—
or a thousand love stories
all knit up in one
this story of these men
and their love of entangling themselves with women
take this one,
leave the other at home,
throw this one away,
take another one instead,

rape this lot
or murder all of these....
HERODOTUS
One thousand ships
An army of determined men
Set forth to bring her back

HOMER
like fiends of hell

HERODOTUS
and to destroy the Trojans
for the wrong
they had done
sheltering Paris
even as he assaulted
all trust
that is the only true shelter
of men and women in the world.

THUCYDIDES
And yet, these fiends of hell
had miscalculated the winds
and could not get their ships to sail

HOMER
They found the body of a pregnant hare

HESIOD [trembling]
and the prophet Calchas interpreted
this portent for Agamemnon,
saying
if you would lead the children of other men to war
to shed their blood
then you be the first
before any man's child is killed
kill one of your own
and then the ships may sail to Troy

THUCYDIDES

And so he did.

HESIOD [in anguish]

And so he did.

Summoned his wife Clytemnestra to Aulis,
saying their daughter Iphigenia
was to be wed to Achilles.

Clytemnestra brought her daughter to the shore
and there Agamemnon murdered her.

[He trembles,
so unsteady for a moment now
that he must kneel on the ground.]

HERODOTUS

Caught in this dilemma
between private love
and public duty

HESIOD

A father's love
and his lust for power—
this meeting place
of tender heart
and a love of domination:
Murdered her.

HOMER

An iron bridal feast.

HERODOTUS

And so brought a curse down
on himself and on his army
even as they sailed to victory.

THUCYDIDES

The power of a public man is measured
by how much blood and treasure
he has the authority to waste.

HESIOD

I saw them sail.

THUCYDIDES

Not fit to sail with them
but fit to stay at home and gossip

HESIOD

To tell their story
over and over again
until we understand it.

HERODOTUS

Ten years they've fought

HOMER

till now the rains
wash away the battlefield
and skulls rise up
from the shallow graves
so that both sides cry out
for an end.

[silence]

HESIOD

One time
I found myself alone
in midafternoon
in a deserted village.
I walked slowly through the streets
among the empty houses.
The village was overgrown with tall weeds
and yet its buildings were intact.

But when I crossed under a dry stone arch,
I stopped abruptly.
I felt the presence of someone
looking at me.
I turned around.
There was a woman
on top of a towerhouse,
out on an open terrace,
dressed in black,
and nailed down at the center
unable to move one way or another.
She was bent almost double
halfway between standing and sitting
rocking her body back and forth
ever so slightly
staring at the abandoned olive terraces
the sun glaring off a thousand rocks.
She had turned from that scene
to look toward me.
I greeted her,
and I could not tell
whether she nodded back at me
or only moved her head
with the rocking of her body
an eternal clock
sedentary and permanent
suffering the curse of those
caught in the eternal present
unable to awaken.

Sometimes
when I am by myself
I carry on a dialogue
with the past,
listening carefully
for the voices of those who have left us.
I touch the stones
with their inscriptions of past fates
inscriptions partially erased

yet still discernible.
I call up the shades
these silent bodies
silent souls
so they might feed on our compassion
and I might learn the source
of our present woes.

[Clytemnestra enters.
She is pale white, as the moon,
white as a Butoh dancer,
a complexion without blood,
and with radiant blood red lips.]

THUCYDIDES
The queen.

HERODOTUS
Clytemnestra.

CLYTEMNESTRA
I dreamed last night
a torch was lit
on Mt. Ida—
and Hephaestus, god of fire,
hurled the light
to Lemnos
and from there to Athos,
the fire flew from torch to torch
mountaintop to mountaintop
island to island
across the sea
like new stars
or suns
to Makistos
Asopus
Cithaeron
Aulis

[silence]

and from Aulis

home

to me.

I love the clouds

any clouds

white, purple, black clouds

rain clouds when they are driven by the wind

a thin wisp of cloud across a bright moon

the dark clouds of the early morning

as they turn gradually to white

What does this mean?

THUCYDIDES

What could it mean?

CLYTEMNESTRA

And then

after the fire came home

I dreamed

we spread the bones out in the sunlight

these bones were meant

for questions of life and death

They say:

if someone's flesh still clings to their bones

then they had done many bad things

but these were clean bones

pure white

we brought them into the house in the afternoon

and walked with them through room after room

going backwards through the seasons

many years

until the house was still

and we put them next to the hearth

and there we heard them sing

These days, they say,
men and women are afraid
to sing the songs they know from childhood
for fear they will die from a longing for the past.

What does this mean?

[The men turn away from her, except Hesiod.]

HESIOD

Today the Greeks hold Troy.

THUCYDIDES

What?

HESIOD

Troy has fallen.

Greece has won.

Our soldiers now
are coming home.

THUCYDIDES

How do you know this?

HESIOD

I don't.

The dreamer does.

HERODOTUS

There have been rumors...

THUCYDIDES

It could mean anything.

This is a lot to know
from the images of a fevered mind.

CLYTEMNESTRA

And this is the meaning then
of all the rest:

that men and women run through the streets
shouts both of happiness and of horror
joy and sorrow mingle equally
like vinegar and oil in one cup
unreconciled.

These are Greeks and Trojans,
victors and their prey.
Falling upon one another
equal victims of their violence.

How can one person bring himself to kill another?
To take another human life.
Snuff it out.
This precious thing.
Destroy it.
Forever.
I don't understand it.

So, all that remains
is the journey home.

All that remains
is the welcoming of the conquerors.

Sometimes,
the most disagreeable sights
come unbidden to one's mind:
a young woman, no more than thirteen years of age
with some pain in her chest
something that
no one knows
no one can identify it
and yet it makes the girl lose all her appetite.
Or a woman with sleeves of unequal length,
it makes her look off balance somehow,
one expects her to tilt right over
fall to the ground
you want to reach out
or say to her

watch out!
your hand comes up as though to say—
something—
and then, of course,
you feel foolish
when you were only trying to help.
Or then again
one time
I wrote down a poem I had heard
and left it on a table
so that one of the maids picked it up
and read it out loud
so clumsily
and I felt,
however wrong it was to feel it,
how devastating it is
to hear a poem rattled off
without any proper feeling.
These words
you sometimes hear
a mother or a father to a child
I love you, dear—
just
rattled off
so that you think
your heart could break
or you could choke with rage.

These times we live in
an eternal present
never an evening of peace.

[Clytemnestra leaves.]

HERODOTUS

One time I dreamed
that I had turned into the River Xanthus in Troy.

I bled for ten years,
and still I didn't die,
because the river is immortal.

HESIOD

[he fights against his trembling from time to time]

To see a river in a dream is a bad sign
ordinarily.

Dead oxen even worse.

Or black mares will signify a famine.

A hare signifies an unlucky journey.

The sight of doves bespeaks involvement.

A mouse: propitious circumstances.

To hold a sparrow
struggling in your hand
forebodes mischief.

To swallow a bunch of grapes indicates rain.

Withered trees:

the uselessness of labor.

HOMER

There are times you will see a black maidenhair fern
in shady places

or sometimes near the trunks of trees

on the banks of ditches

in wet ravines

on heaths or in the woods

in turf bogs

on the high rocks

in the clefts of rocks

on rotted wood

or in a meadow

each one of these has its own affect

whether in a dream

or in the waking world

You might see two boys playing with a bird

an old woman feeding a cat

HESIOD

a navelled fig with wrinkled skin

HERODOTUS

a walnut just out of its green rind

HESIOD

a quince covered with fresh dew

HOMER

hour glasses

HERODOTUS

combs of horn

buttons

silk stockings of the colors of the orient

shoes of Spanish leather

rolls of parchment

a bundle of tobacco

HESIOD

an orange gathered from the tree that grew over Zebulon's Tomb

HERODOTUS

a sitar

birds nests from China

HESIOD

prisms

HERODOTUS

the complete head and body of Father Crispin

buried long ago in the Vault of the Cordeliers at Toulouse;

a stone taken from a vulture's head;

a large ostrich egg on which is inscribed the famous battle of Alcazar

in which three kings lost their lives;

HESIOD

the skin of a snake bred from the spinal marrow of a man;

HOMER

jasmine

narcissus

HERODOTUS

scarlet ribbons

a toothpick case

an eyebrow brush

a pair of French scissors

a quart of orange flower water

four pounds of scented snuff

a tweezer case—

enameled

an amber-headed cane

a tailor's bill

lessons for the flute

an almanac for the year 1700

HESIOD

petrified moss

petrified wood

Brazil pebbles

Egyptian bloodstones

hummingbirds

pieces of white spar

HOMER

a piece of the stone of the oracle of Apollo

THUCYDIDES

Bucharest salami

a Turkish powder horn

a pistol

HESIOD

a giant's head

HERODOTUS

a music box

HOMER

a quill pen

HERODOTUS

a red umbrella

HOMER

some faded thing

handkerchiefs made of lawn

of cambric

of Irish linen

of Chinese silk

HESIOD

and each one of these

may make you wonder

whether it signifies the past or the future

or is only meant to

fill you with a longing

for such moments of life

in the afternoon

and the wish

that they should go on forever.

[The Messenger enters.

He is filthy, in torn clothes.

One arm gone.

A foot wrapped in bandages.

Dragging a large burlap bag.]

MESSENGER

Are you veterans?

HESIOD

Of the war?

MESSENGER

Of the war in Troy.

HESIOD

No.

HOMER

Not of that war.

THUCYDIDES

You've returned from Troy?

MESSENGER

My ship was the first to land.

There are some others with me.

Not many.

Some other boats went down.

There was a storm.

THUCYDIDES

And King Agamemnon?

MESSENGER

He's on his way.

HERODOTUS

And Menelaus?

MESSENGER

I don't know.

Like I said:

some ships went down.

Of course, I was only a cog in the wheel
but I myself never mistreated a prisoner,
far less killed one.

They left their cattle in the stables
dinner on the tables
Of course
of those who had fallen
not all were dead,
some were clawing at their clothes
or shrieking
or crawling over the motionless bodies of those who were dead
some spurting blood
hands clutching at their torn flesh
arms moving puppetlike

We paused for a moment by the river of time,
as they say,
sucked the honey from the bone-marrow of some strangers
and smeared it across their faces
Stirred up some blood.

And on the day of judgment
my fellows and I who fought in this war
will collect our scattered bones
and submit them for roll-call,

and we will be told to advance—
and we'll do it!

Man is spirit, but what is spirit? Spirit is the self, but what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but consists in the fact that the relation relates itself to its own self. Man is the synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity. So regarded, man is not yet a self, but may become a self in relation to another, as in war.

THUCYDIDES

What a lie to say that fortune favors the bold.
Fortune favors the cretins and the madmen.
Fortune is on the side of the savages.

MESSENGER

What would you know?

Thrown into an army in the field a man is weaned from whatever excess of tenderness toward his precious person he may bring with him

These are visions I can see
at any time of night or day
eyes opened or eyes closed

Where there were houses
we left rubble,
smoldering woodpiles,
ulcers festering on naked terrain.
We smashed our way into crowds
of men and women
raging and beating and hunting;
we drove them across the fields
like frightened horses;
we set fire to their houses;
we hurled their corpses into wells;
everything that came to hand
we ruined;
our hearts were emptied of human feelings;
we burned whatever we could.

There comes a time
you can't distinguish the images of day from night.

THUCYDIDES

The body is nothing
but a product of semen and of blood
which then becomes a meal for death
a dwelling place for suffering
a tavern for disease.
A man may know all this
and yet
from lack of judgment
drowning in a sea of ignorance,
he yearns for love, for women, and for power.

MESSENGER

In the aftermath,
one feels the chill in the countryside,
the low-lying white mist,
shards of farmhouses in the haze,
shattered stones,
no grass,
no ruins,
empty streets,
and silence
no living thing
no bird, no animal broke the silence
no dogs,
no children,
not one stone left standing on another,
rather a wilderness of stones,
even if one could trace it for a distance,
there would be a danger of getting lost,
because there is no sign of direction.

HERODOTUS

No one knew what was happening
or why—
those were the rumors we heard back home—
or who had a chance to survive and who didn't
where the safe places were
who was born under a lucky star

THUCYDIDES

It's all very complicated.
All a matter of the complicity of "all parties"
a result of ancient feuds
difficult to pin the blame.

MESSENGER

a light ash of gold
covering the fields
the victors covered in glory
dust to golden dust

this is precious dust
One had the impression
of having passed out of the modern world
back into a vanished civilization.

The color of the dead:
faces changed from white to yellow-grey,
to red,
to purple,
to green,
to black,
to slick.

So
I've brought these things home

[he opens a burlap bag,
brings out battered, dirt-encrusted gold cups
and/or rusted 19th century wagon wheels
a broken glass of indeterminate age
and other ruined precious or not-so-precious items
from various epochs]

And these words

[handing a scroll to one of the chorus
who unrolls it to read]

to be inscribed in some public place:

[he recites]

The Argive army conquered Troy
And brought home over land and sea
These hard-won spoils, the pride and joy
of ancient palaces, to be
Trophies of victory, and grace
the temples of the Hellene race

HERODOTUS

The rumor we heard was that there is no longer a menagerie in the royal palace of Troy. That even those innocent animals were killed.

MESSENGER

I don't know anything about that.

HERODOTUS

The last grizzly bear has died, they say.

MESSENGER

I don't know anything about that.

HERODOTUS

They say that a few ponies are still wandering around in that no-man's land. But that most of them were caught and butchered.

MESSENGER

That's not true.

HERODOTUS

I've heard that someone saw a peacock and a white swan killed for no good reason at all.

MESSENGER

There are always rumors.
By definition none of them are true.

THUCYDIDES

We are told there are witnesses
to some of these things.

MESSENGER

Make of it what you will.
For my part,
I remember none of it.

And as for me, and for my friends, we're finished—
coming home,

stripped of whatever it was we had.
Before, the quiet moments between battle
were not moments of peace
but periods of mounting tension
anticipating their release—
now
there will be no release,
just the waiting.
Sensation is dead.
Time rolls on—but it has lost
whatever it had
that was brilliant.

[He leaves.]

HERODOTUS

Now at last
the long war is over
and the most pervasive feeling
of those who fought
is anxiety about the peace.

THUCYDIDES

They won't have long to wait.
There's no such thing as peace.
Peace is nothing but
an armistice in a war that never ends.

HOMER

These wars:
declared by old men
who send their young to die

HESIOD

Clutching a weapon
from the depths of sleep
comes easily—

it's in our blood,
the same gesture with which
Ice Age man took hold of his ax of stone.

HERODOTUS

There was a time
when you came indoors from the fields
you would expect to see
traces of human occupation everywhere;
fires still burning in the fireplaces
because someone meant to come right back;
a book lying face down on the window seat;
a paintbox
and beside it
a glass
full of cloudy water;
flowers in a cut glass vase;
an unfinished game of solitaire;
a piece of cross-stitching
with a needle and thread stuck in it;
building blocks
or lead soldiers
in the middle of the library floor;
lights left burning in empty rooms.
This was the inner life,
not found in bare inscriptions,
ancestral lists,
great events.

[They pull an old victrola from the detritus around them
and play a section of Arvo Part's Te Deum.
As the music plays, they sit or stand silently and listen.]

Agamemnon enters.

His hands and face are deeply stained with blood.

His clothes are filthy and torn and stained with blood.

He has a large hawser over his shoulder, and with it, he drags behind him

packing boxes, steamer trunks, other things containing the spoils of war.
Many more spoils than the Messenger was entitled to.
The glaring hot sun of midday.

THUCYDIDES
Agamemnon.

HESIOD
Like a ghost.

HERODOTUS
How does one address
a vision such as this?
With pity or with praise?

HESIOD
Why not say right out:
ten years ago
when you left for Troy
we thought you were wrong.
Misguided.
Wrong.

THUCYDIDES
Those times are past.

HERODOTUS
Agamemnon.
Welcome home.

AGAMEMNON
Thank you.
I bring a conqueror's greeting
to my home.
We brought a just revenge to Troy.
For the Trojans' rape of Helen
we have made the city
pay a woman's price.
We have ground that city's bones

we have turned its walls to dust
And even now smoke still rises
to mark that great city's fall.
Come face to face
with what it is to be a man.

HESIOD

We were told
that even innocent children
were killed in this war—
young girls even

AGAMEMNON

That's not true.
Not to my knowledge.
This is not something our men would have done.

HERODOTUS

We were told the men took pleasure
breaking into private homes
dragging women out into the streets and...

AGAMEMNON

That's not true.
Perhaps one or two.
War is a school of strenuous life.
War is a school of heroism.

THUCYDIDES

I was told of one man
who lifted a body that had fallen to the floor
placed her on the couch
she stretched out her arms to protect herself

AGAMEMNON

These stories are not true.
I've heard such things myself.
The world is a bleeding wound
when it comes to that.

THUCYDIDES

One conversation was quoted to me
between a soldier and a woman.
He said I'd like to hear your opinion as an artist.
About what, she asked.
About whether you have a perfect figure, he said.
The story is he had insisted
that she let her gown drop to the floor....

AGAMEMNON

These are fictions
made up by demented people
All these stories that you hear
What do you think is true?

After all,
The natural state of a man,
the ecstatic state, will find itself in the visions of things that appear
suddenly:
cadavers, for example,
nudity, explosions, spilled blood, sunbursts, abscesses, thunder.
So much is undeniable.

Everything that exists
destroys itself
when it comes to that.
The sun in the sky
like an orgy of frozen light,
lost.
Consuming itself
and dying.
The stars
consuming themselves
in an agony of fire.
The joy of life that comes into the world
to give itself
and be annihilated.

Everything
living and dead
mortally wounded.
Blood and open bodies.

A human being can be thought of as a tree trunk on fire
You can lay them down screaming
on their stomachs or their backs—
or you can spare the fire
and lay them out on the beach
nothing more than breathless lacerations
shapeless silhouettes
half eaten
getting up or moaning on the ground
then you might say
the head—
the eyes, the ears, the brain
are the complications of the buccal orifice
the penis, the testicles
the female organs that correspond to these
are the complications of the anal orifice.
Thus one has the familiar violent thrusts
that come from the interior of the body
indifferently ejected
from one end of the body or the other
discharged,
wherever they meet the weakest resistance
as in war.

HERODOTUS

Everything that seemed impossible yesterday
has become entirely possible today.

AGAMEMNON

One group of soldiers
had caught a female ape
from the menagerie
tied up with ropes
struggling to break free

but trussed up like a chicken
legs folded back against her body
tied upside down to a stake
planted in the middle of a pit
howling and swallowing dirt
its anus screaming pink and pointing at the sky
like a flower
and all the men around the pit
stripped naked for the work and sweating with pleasure
and anticipation
armed with shovels
filling in the pit with dirt
burying the ape alive
its screams choked on the dirt
until all that remains
is the radiant flower of its anus
touched by gentle white fingers
its violent contractions
helpless as it strangles on the dirt
and all who stand around the pit and watch
are overcome by heat and stupor
their throats choked by sighs
and crying out
eyes moist with tears.

HESIOD

Who will pay for this?

AGAMEMNON

I don't think a girl can avoid
thinking of her little rear end
when she sees
that anal baldness of the apes
on the other side of the bars of a cage

Take any war by itself

it makes no sense.

The meaning of any moment in history
cannot appear all at once.

Only in the succession of moments can it become clear.
One moment meaningful only in relation to the other moments before and after.
We are at each instant
only fragments deprived of meaning.
The totality of time alone
makes up and completes a human life.

HOMER

This is how men are.

AGAMEMNON

I can imagine the earth projected in space
as it is
in reality
like a woman screaming,
her head in flames.

The demons may be women—
as agents of destruction
or trapdoors into nothingness—
women as elements within the undirected streaming
of pleasure that will kill—
or they may be children

In war
one might take a child by its feet
from its bed at night
carry it out to the courtyard
swing it round in an arc
and smash its head against a tree

Or take a girl from her mother's arms
and tear her in half
like a rag.

These girls
who look to you
as they might look to their fathers
innocent

begging
eyes wide with trust
and love

Ladies should never fall in love.
They become stars
no one can ever reach. To look taller
they cut their heads off and stand on them.

Some fall in love with foreign accents
and dark vowels.
You see them late at night
in taverns, talking with dangerous criminals
Late at night, their voices
are small animals
waiting to be fed.

It's a nightmare really.

HERODOTUS
When men go to war
they invade their own homes first.

HESIOD
They murder first what's best in them.

HERODOTUS
A man can be completely immobilized by grief.

AGAMEMNON
One company of soldiers
rounded up two hundred women
took them to an empty slaughterhouse
made them strip naked
and get down on all fours
like cattle
they drove them forward
to a ramp
where they were

where the soldiers
lashed out at them
with knives
and axes
forcing them to
keep crawling
until they could crawl no more
their torsos
their arms and legs hacked off
their headless torsos
left to fall
into the abyss below

HESIOD

After this
everything is possible.

AGAMEMNON

But we have put all this
behind us now.
Now we look to the future.
To the just rewards of peace.
To the restoration of the civic order.
The comforts of a secure home
and family.
The love of children.
The fruits and labors of peacetime
of building
of nurturing our children
of passing down to a new generation
the values we all cherish.
The mornings of shared expectation
long afternoons of idle play
of company in the evenings
the pleasures of the table
of polite conversation

delights of the mind
of music
and sweet sleep.
A world restored.

[Clytemnestra enters
with blood red tapestries in her arms.]

Agamemnon,
my lord and husband.

AGAMEMNON
Clytemnestra.

[silence. rigidity.]

CLYTEMNESTRA
There was a rumor
that you had come back with another woman.
But I see that it's not true.

AGAMEMNON
No.

CLYTEMNESTRA
Welcome home.

What shall I tell you all at once
of these ten years
that you've been gone

AGAMEMNON
And what shall I...

CLYTEMNESTRA
Ten years alone
with each day
new rumors of your death
each traveller bearing news

worse than the last.
To see you now,
my eyes fill with tears
to know relief
from all my sorrow
is here within my reach at last

So many times
wavering between life and death
I've been overwhelmed with despair
And so
our child is gone
not standing here with us on your day of victory.

Why do you start?
I mean Orestes.
Fearing unrest here at home
if you did not return
I sent him away
where he would be safe.

Of all the many things I find agreeable
sometimes I think none is so comforting
as when one has an upsetting dream
and wonders what it can mean.
In great anxiety
one consults an interpreter of dreams
and is told
that it has no special significance at all.

I've watched for you every night
my eyes still burn with watching for you
praying for your return
I wept by the bed I kept for you alone
In my dreams I saw this moment come
I never let it die.
My husband.
Come.
Come home with me.

Come to our bed,
lie with me
in my arms
forever.

But no. Wait.
Don't put your foot on the naked earth.
Come.
Have the honor that is due to you.
Walk into your home
on these tapestries.

I meant to write a poem
welcoming you home
something special
that others would remember
and copy down in their diaries.
Though this is something that has never happened to me
I can imagine how pleasing it must be.

But even so, without a poem,
walk into your home
on these tapestries.

AGAMEMNON

Clytemnestra,
my wife,
thank you—
for your compassion,
your understanding,
and your praise.
I am exhausted
and I would lie down.

But, thank you:
no red silks for me to walk on.
This is an honor due the gods,
not to me.
What man should set his foot

on such rich treasures—
woven by the hands of many women.
Such pride is frightening to me.
Honor me, please, as a man,
not a god.

CLYTEMNESTRA

The sea is teeming with such dyes as these,
you're no king of paupers,
there are scores more silks like these
within your house.
Come.
This one time.
For this moment like no other in your life.
Celebrate your coming home.

AGAMEMNON

Thank you, Clytemnestra,
but I would rather come through the door
with an easy mind.

[She will try anything: seduction, flirtation, playfulness, humor.]

CLYTEMNESTRA

Indulge me just this once.

AGAMEMNON

Please.

CLYTEMNESTRA

If I would promise
to undress you very carefully
give you a bath
wash the dust of travel from your body
very slowly.

AGAMEMNON

Would you?

CLYTEMNESTRA

If I would promise
to wash your hair
let you put your head back in my hands
hold you there to rest

AGAMEMNON

You make it hard
for me to refuse.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Bathe your tired eyes
with my tongue.

AGAMEMNON

Well...

CLYTEMNESTRA

Put my tongue in your ear.

AGAMEMNON [smiling]

Really?

CLYTEMNESTRA

Or up your nostril.

AGAMEMNON [laughing]

You go too far!

CLYTEMNESTRA

If the Trojan king had won the war,
what do you think he would have done?

AGAMEMNON

He might have walked on silks such as these.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Will you be humbler than the man you've beaten?

AGAMEMNON

Yes, I might.

Why be so insistent?

Does it suit a woman to be so
aggressive?

CLYTEMNESTRA

Does it suit a man to be so set against
even the littlest desire of his wife?

I think these red silks suit you.

Then, too, does it not suit greatness
to accept defeat with grace.

And you,

so accustomed to being victor in all things,
have had so little opportunity
to show this form of magnanimity
and accept this honor I would give you.

AGAMEMNON

You have the persistence of a great soldier.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Yield to me.

You the victor;

give me my victory, too.

AGAMEMNON

Since you are so resolved.

[to Clytemnestra]

Here.

Help me.

Untie my sandals.

If I am to walk across
this deep-sea treasure,
let me feel it on my skin.

[Clytemnestra takes off his sandals,
then rises and takes his hand,
and walks with him toward the house,
he on the silks, she just off the edge.]

CLYTEMNESTRA [calling out loudly, triumphantly]
Here comes
my husband
King Agamemnon
home!

[Hesiod begins to tremble uncontrollably.
He collapses to the ground
thrashing
in an epileptic seizure.
The other chorus members rush to him to help.
He speaks in fits and bursts—
until the end,
when he subsides somewhat,
speaks more slowly,
and finally is relaxed, and exhausted,
in his final words.]

HESIOD
A wretched ghost—
tears—
and tears—
the skin—
then
eats
first
the flesh
strong
and putrid
shoulders
buttocks
backflesh
tendons
guts

and eyes.
He bares his teeth
and from the corpse upon his lap
calmly eats the remnant to the marrow of its bones.
[They turn to see Cassandra.]

[Cassandra emerges from the packing boxes
or from a steamer trunk.
She is bleeding from the eyes
wearing torn clothes.
Late afternoon.]

HERODOTUS
What's this?

CASSANDRA
What are you accustomed to seeing in this port?

Cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls?
fine linen, purple silk and scarlet cloth
every sort of citron wood
and articles of every kind made of ivory
cargoes of cinnamon and spice
incense, myrrh and frankincense
of wine and olive oil
cattle and sheep
horses and carriages
the bodies and souls of men
and of women.
No more.
The merchants of the earth
will weep and mourn over this city.

They will say:
the fruit you longed for is gone from you.

Your country has become the home for demons.
The merchants of the earth grew rich
from your excessive luxuries
and all the nations have drunk
the maddening wine of your greed.

But you do not realize that you are wretched,
pitiful, poor, blind, and naked.

Here I am!
I stand at the door and knock!
I am Cassandra,
the daughter of the murdered King of Troy.
If anyone hears my voice and opens the door
I will come in
and tell you what I see that is to come!

Every sea captain
and all who travel by ship
and all who earn their living from the sea
will stand far off
When they see the smoke of her burning
they will exclaim:
Was there ever a city like this great city?
They will throw dust on their heads and weep.

The music of harpists
flute players and trumpeters
will never be heard in you again
No workman of any trade
will ever be found in you again
The sound of a millstone
will never be heard in you again
The light of a lamp
will never shine in you again
The voice of bridegroom and bride
will never be heard in you again

Your merchants were the world's great men
By your magic spell
all the nations of the world were led astray.

THUCYDIDES
What nonsense.

CASSANDRA
On your shores
I saw four living creatures
covered with eyes, front and back
and I heard one of the creatures say
in a voice of thunder
Come!
And I looked,
and there before me
was a white horse
whose rider held a bow.

And I heard the second creature say
Come!
And another horse came out
fiery red
with a rider carrying a sword

And I heard the third creature say
Come!
And there before me was a black horse
and its rider was holding a pair of scales

And I heard the fourth creature say
Come!
and I looked,
and there before me was a pale horse
with a rider named Death

And these four were each given power
over a fourth of the earth,
to kill by sword, famine, plague,
and by the wild beasts of the earth.

THUCYDIDES

What sort of person
would think civilized men and women
would give serious attention
to this sort of wild superstition?

HOMER

There is more truth in poetry
than in a mere rendering of the facts
of any matter.

THUCYDIDES

That's nothing but a recipe
for lunacy.

CASSANDRA

Now, look!
Now I see
children weeping
whispering in the house
vile plotting
children butchered like lambs
by their own elders
Look what they carry in their hands:
their own flesh,
limb and rib and heart they hold;
children made to herd their own mothers and fathers
to the fires;
in a mass grave:
a boy, dressed in white,
his face pressed to his mother's shoulder;
a child screams,
and from its mouth comes a bloody foam;
infants taken from their mother's arms

and thrown head first, with awful force
onto the road;
a child swung round by a soldier
its head smashed against a wagon wheel;
bodies clinging so tightly together
they can't be separated
even after death;
a bucket pulled up from a well
half full of human eyes
bones ground to powder
and taken away in sacks
thirty sacks a day

the altar is prepared
a hunting net made ready
the treacherous water's poured, the bath is full
she holds him in a trap made like a gown
despairing hands reach out

[Cassandra screams]

She strikes!
He crashes down!
She has murdered him!
Agamemnon is dead!

Look:
you.
See what comes here
to those who put their trust in earthly power
to those who take their happy state for granted

Here your country stands in ruin
this masterpiece of the gods,
brought down
with all her towering beauty
her massive walls
her men and women
secure in the comforts of their settled lives

the love of their children
smoke rises up from every corner
the country is looted even while it burns
Could this never happen to you?

Look on Troy,
look on the House of Atreus
and see on what uncertain ground
the pomp of empire stands.

Run, then,
run to your own death
don't live
another moment
if all you know to do
is contribute to the pain.

[She bolts and runs at full speed to join Agamemnon.]

A SCREAM

The doors fly open,
and we see
Agamemnon's dead body in a silver tub,
and Cassandra's dead body across it.
Clytemnestra holds a bloody knife.
Nighttime.

CLYTEMNESTRA

I said many things to my husband
I said I longed for him to return
I said my eyes burned with watching for him
I said I wept with joy to see him come home to me
Every word I said was true
And had I known you were bringing home
this woman for your bed
I'd have longed even more intently
for your homecoming.

I only wish
we had had a chance
to talk to one another
I wish you could have told me
like a human being
what brought you to murder
your own sweet child.

One day, her tears will catch up with you.

How could a person kill another human creature?

I think, of course,
I know
if any person does—
and yet
it remains, somehow, a complete mystery.

It's a nightmare really.

So now I've finished all I was called upon
to do.

And I only pray to the gods
who persecute this House:
now forget the past.

It has no claim on us.

We're done with it.

Leave us alone.

Oppress some other home.

I ask nothing more.

THUCYDIDES

And do you think
the gods have done with you?
Now you are a murderer.

CLYTEMNESTRA

An executioner for justice sake.

This man was a murderer,

sacrificing his own daughter
to his ambition and his cowardice.
Whose life was safe at home
with a man who would murder
his own defenseless daughter?
I apologize for nothing.
I beg no one for forgiveness.
Do you think I don't know it was wrong?
Unforgiveable.
Although I beg forgiveness.
I would cut his throat again.

THUCYDIDES

And be, yourself, a murderer.

CLYTEMNESTRA

What would you have had me do?
Appeal to the courts?
What court would conduct a fair trial?
He was a hero.

And anyway,
I don't know what could bring a person
to kill another human being!
How could this be explained?

What would have happened
but that I would have been put in chains
as a mad woman
and he would have gone free
to bring some new woman into my house.

I have two other children
Would they be safe?

Where were you
when this man destroyed every shred

of justice.
That was your time to speak,
not now.

HERODOTUS

What was true then
is true today.
When the fabric of the civic order is torn,
no one is safe.
This is how it has been,
and ever will be.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Noble ideals.
I share them.
But they do not describe the world I live in
or protect me from the man
to whom I was married.
There's no law
that could explain
the life I've come to live
and the world in which I live it.

THUCYDIDES

Don't expect you can appeal now
to some idea of justice
or some other notion of the good
to protect you from those who hate you.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Protect me?
I need no protection now.
I have my children.
No one would touch me.

[Aegisthus enters.

He is a gigolo,
and a homicidal maniac.
He is naked and wears a sheet.]

AEGISTHUS

What's all this bickering?
This is a day of deliverance,
a time for celebration,
a time you can believe at last
there is justice in the world.
The gods do see to that.
Agamemnon has paid the price at last
for what his father did to mine.

[Here follows history as vitriol,
history as vengefulness.
A nasty recital,
filled with rage and hatred.]

All of you know
this was the punishment that was his due.
His father Atreus
drove my father Thyestes
from this city.
And when my father returned
to make peace with Atreus,
Atreus gave a banquet in Thyestes' honor.
Only because I was an infant
left at home
was I myself absent from this feast.
And for dinner
Atreus served to Thyestes
the bodies, chopped and cooked
of my brothers,
Thyestes' own two sons.
Has ever a more unspeakable
crime been committed?
Was the House of Atreus —
and its heirs to this monster's crown —
to escape the consequences of this act?
Was such horror simply to be forgotten?
No. Never.

It was left to me
to avenge my father
against the House of Atreus.
To take back this city
from the heirs of Atreus.
Now I am satisfied at last,
I could die now
seeing Agamemnon finally brought to justice.

I could have killed him with hammering in his head
I could have killed him driving nails into his chest
I would have split him with an ax
right up his buttocks
I could have hung his torso from a meat hook

The swift cutting of his throat
was an act of euthanasia.

Think no more about it.
What's done is done.
Let's not wallow in the past.
Let's put all that behind us
and move on.

[And what follows is pornographic, not tender—
or tender, and also pornographic.]

Come, Clytemnestra.
Come inside.
I know how to
soothe your anguish,
make you forget.
I know how to hold you
my head on your breast
fingers twined in your hair
to kiss your breast
caress it with my tongue
I know how to slide my hand
down to your thigh

let my fingers wander up inside you
and with my hand thrust deep inside
to talk with you
that moment when
whatever it is I ask
you speak the truth to me
as you have always done
in these years past
when Agamemnon was away.

Come.

I know how you would be comforted
to feel the ache of longing
the satisfaction of love.

A hand slipped round your buttock
coming to you from behind
as though you were a girl again
making love for the first time
a thirteen year old

in her father's arms

Come with me then

Come

and come again.

Let me hold you

in my arms.

If men and women knew true love,

tenderness,

trust,

care,

they would know true peace forever.

[Clytemnestra turns and goes with him.]

HESIOD

All the things of the world
come into being by themselves
and so they are immortal.

Life itself is eternal.

But our individual lives have beginnings and ends.

And this individual life

is distinguished from all other things
by the rectilinear course of its movement,
which cuts through the cycle of biological life.

This is mortality:
to move along a line
in a universe where everything,
if it moves at all,
moves in cycles.

And all things that owe their existence to men,
all works, all deeds, all words,
are perishable—
unless men may endow these works and deeds
with some permanence
by making them forever memorable:

and then these things
may enter the world of everlastingness,
and mortal men and women
may find their place in the cosmos.

This is the riddle of time:
the human capacity to achieve remembrance
is the capacity to transform time
into eternity.

Nothing human is forever;
everything perishes;
except the human heart
that has the capacity to remember
and the capacity to say:
never again
or
forever.

And so it is
that our own hearts
and nothing else

are the final arbiters
of what it is
to be human.

[Music.]

THE END

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The text for Agamemnon 2.0 was written under the direction of Brian Kulick and with the assistance of Greg Gunter as dramaturg. Composed the way Max Ernst made his Fatagaga pieces at the end of World War I, some of the texts were inspired by or taken from the work of Hesiod, Herodotus, Thucydides, Homer, Aeschylus, Artemidorus, The Book of Revelations, Philip Vellacott, Slavenka Drakulic, Zlatko Dizdarevic, Zbigniew Herbert, Pierre Klossowski, Georges Bataille, Sei Shonagon, and Hannah Arendt.

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