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## Agamemnon 2.0

by CHARLES L. MEE

Based on the play by Aeschylus

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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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