



Abigail
Akavia

Dancing
with
Philoctetes

Reflections on
Pain and
Remembrance

DANCING WITH PHILOCTETES

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Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

DANCING WITH PHILOCTETES: REFLECTIONS ON PAIN AND REMEMBRANCE.
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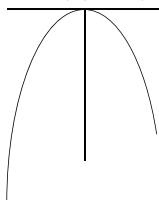
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Dancing
with
Philoctetes

Reflections on
Pain and
Remembrance

With a new adaptation of
Sophocles' **Philoctetes**

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For my sons
Z & A

Preface

This book has two parts. The first is an English version of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* which I adapted from the ancient Greek, and the second is an essay about reading, translating, performing, and thinking with *Philoctetes*.

The script included here is, except for some minor changes, the version of the play performed in March 2020, in a production of English Theatre Leipzig in association with Neues Schauspiel Leipzig. Matthew Hendershot composed and produced the score, with additional compositions by Shira Bitan and by Ian Cox. Bitan also served as choral director and composed the musical arrangements. The costume design was by Karin Brauner, set and lighting design by Peter Klippell, and make-up by Sophie Caws. Justin Sands was stage-manager, and Jamie Grasse assisted in production. I directed the following cast:

| | |
|-------------|--|
| PHILOCTETES | Felix Kerkhoff |
| NEOPTOLEMUS | Em Wessel |
| ODYSSEUS | Laura Shann |
| CHORUS | Glenn Abel, Laura Albertz, Yuval Gal Cohen, Danny Copesescu, Julia Kragh, Letizia Rivera, Rafael Wolff |

While the cast was of mixed genders, with non-male actors playing the male characters of Neoptolemus and Odysseus as well as several chorus members, I chose not to have a woman play Philoctetes. My main reason was concern about how such casting would affect the so-called pain scene, the scene mid-play where Philoctetes experiences an explosively vocal paroxysm. I felt that putting a woman in vocal pain center stage, given all that this image conventionally evokes in our fundamentally misogynistic culture (primarily hysterical representations of childbirth), would be distracting and non-organic for our production. One could certainly use *Philoctetes* to reflect on the particular modality of female loneliness in suffering, but casting a woman in the lead was not my way to do so.

Writing this book, however, was. It is rooted in my work as a scholar of classics and as a theater artist, but also branches out to what may seem like completely different topics. It is about being a sister and a woman (young and then not-so-young) in a world where empathy is as crucial and as fragile as it is in *Philoctetes*, the famously all-male play. It is an attempt to braid together grief and motherhood and homesickness and the body. Some of these strands inevitably wander astray, as the hairs above my forehead always seemed to revolt against the neat and tidy bun I tried to tug them into for ballet class.

In sections 1 and 2 of the essay following the script, I discuss the casting as well as other dramaturgical, musical, and translational choices I made while working on the 2020 production. Throughout the four sections of the essay, I think about how significant experiences in my life intersect with reading and interpreting *Philoctetes*. The essay weaves pasts and presents into a narrative that calls back to its own beginning and searches for its end in a war-torn reality, ever nightmarishly repeating. In this it takes inspiration from *Philoctetes* itself, from what I argue is the play's painful, beautiful rumination on the impossibility of extracting the body from violence, the voice from its absence. A mythology of self and selves that bounds us to miscommunication — writing from and against this drama, this fiction, this reality, is what the essay attempts to do.

The book has been a long time in the making, farther back even than the first drafts of my translation of the play. The starting point should at least be the first time I read the play during my BA studies, if not my first conscious memory of disease piercing the safety of my childhood home. So, while the essay articulates an interpretation of Sophocles in relation to a particular moment in time and space (specifically, the Leipzig stage production), it is at once a tapestry of memories, positioning itself relative to past moments of pain or solitude, actively seeking them out, trying to hold on to them as they dissipate like steam. Working on the play is thus juxtaposed to what it was like when I first felt or read or thought or mourned something — when I first understood something in my body. In that, I hope that the essay is experienced much like the script: as writing that must be imagined in and heard through physical bodies.

Sophocles' *Philoctetes*:
An Adaptation

Characters

PHILOCTETES, in his late 40s.

ODYSSEUS, in his late 40s.

NEOPTOLEMUS, 19 years old.

CHORUS of military sailors, subordinate to Neoptolemus but older than him.

The scene

Lemnos, a deserted island. Signs of a cave and crude habitation.

Enter ODYSSEUS and NEOPTOLEMUS

ODYSSEUS

Here we are, the island of Lemnos.

Neoptolemus, you are the son of Achilles — the greatest warrior who ever lived.

That is why I picked you for this mission.

Do you see this shore, deserted and unwelcoming?

This is where I left Philoctetes.

I was under orders from on high, there was no other way.

His foot was consumed by sepsis, dripping rot.

We couldn't even make our sacrifices in peace, so violent were his screams and curses.

Never mind that.

If he hears me, my whole plan is ruined.

It's up to you now, so get to work. Survey the grounds.

Advance in silence, soldier!

Can you see a cave? And a spring somewhere near, if I recall correctly.

NEOPTOLEMUS (*advancing*)

Odysseus, Sir. There's a cave here.

ODYSSEUS

Anyone there?

NEOPTOLEMUS

No. The place is desolate.

ODYSSEUS

Look out, he may be asleep.

NEOPTOLEMUS

There's no one here.

ODYSSEUS (*advancing a bit*)

Any sign that he lives there?

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NEOPTOLEMUS

There are leaves piled together, like a mattress...

ODYSSEUS

Anything else?

NEOPTOLEMUS

A cup carved out of wood. Rough work. And... oh,
ugh... these rags, soaked with discharge.

ODYSSEUS

Clearly, this is his place. He's not far off.
How could he be, he's crippled.
Still, we should be on the lookout. He'll kill me the second he
sees me.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Yes, Sir.

ODYSSEUS (*approaching Neoptolemus*)

Listen, Neoptolemus, son of Achilles. You're decent.
You've got the brawn.
But: you're here to serve. You do what I tell you.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What are my orders? Sir.

ODYSSEUS

To deceive Philoctetes. Trap him with lies.
Tell him you're the son of Achilles, don't lie about that!
But say you're sailing home from Troy.
Say that you had a colossal argument with the Greek
commanders. That they begged you to join their war, but
then they wouldn't give you the armor of Achilles that you
rightfully demanded.
Say they gave it to Odysseus instead.

About me say whatever the hell you want. Absolutely nothing you say can hurt me. If you *don't* bad-mouth me, you're putting the entire Greek army at risk.

You got that?

If you don't seize his bow, you cannot sail back to Troy.

I can't do it. You, he'll trust. You didn't go on the first mission with us.

But me, if he so much as smells me, I'm done — and you with me.

So. You need to find a way to steal his invincible arms.

(*Beat*)

Son, I know it's against your nature to plot and lie.

But you like winning, right?

When this is all over, we will shine.

Give yourself over to me for a short hour, and then for the rest of your days, be a good guy.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I can't bear even listening to this, Odysseus.

It's against my nature to be dishonest... and it was against my father's nature, too!

I'm ready to take the man by force — not by deceit! He's a cripple, right? He's no match for us.

But if I go along with what you ask, everyone will think I'm a cheat.

To win so shamefully... ?

Respectfully, sir, I'd rather fail and keep my honor intact.

ODYSSEUS

Son, your father was noble, yes. I was also like you when I was young.

But now I know that people are convinced by words, not facts.

NEOPTOLEMUS

But you're asking me to lie.

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ODYSSEUS

I'm asking you to trick Philoctetes.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Why? Can't we convince him instead?

ODYSSEUS

He will never be convinced. And you can't take him by force.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Why not?

ODYSSEUS

His bow and arrows are invincible — deadly.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Confrontation is not an option, then.

ODYSSEUS

No way to get to him, unless, as I say, you trick him.

(Beat)

NEOPTOLEMUS

You're not ashamed to lie?

ODYSSEUS

No. Not if lying gets me what I need.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What are you saying!? I can't even —

ODYSSEUS *(interrupting)*

Don't get so worked up. You're doing this for your own gain.
Troy will fall only by those arrows.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I thought you said *I* will conquer the city.

ODYSSEUS

Not without his weapon.

NEOPTOLEMUS

That, then, is our target.

ODYSSEUS

And afterwards, everyone will say you're smart, *and* you'll have your honor intact.

(*Beat*)

NEOPTOLEMUS

So be it. I'm setting shame aside. I'll do it.

ODYSSEUS

Do you remember your orders?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I said I'd do it. Sir.

ODYSSEUS

Very well. I'm off, then. I cannot be seen around here. I'll leave you to it: speak *well*.

(NEOPTOLEMUS *signals to his men*. CHORUS *enter*)

Entrance-Song*

CHORUS

Tell us, sir, we are strangers here,

* The musical parts of the script are given under separate headings. They are sung unless explicitly mentioned otherwise.

what to say? He's a suspicious man.
Tell us, son, you're our commander.
What do you need from us?

NEOPTOLEMUS

This is where he lives, on the very edge.
But when he comes back, the terrible wanderer,
be on the lookout, and pay attention to me.

CHORUS

I always look out for you, sir,
and keep an eye out now,
I've got your back.
Tell us what you know.
Where is he? What is this place?
If he's not here, where did he go?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Out looking for food, can't be very far
dragging that foot.
This is what I heard of him:
hunting wild beasts, with Heracles's bow,
but his agony no one can heal.
He's all alone.

CHORUS

I pity him, think how
all alone, no one cares for him,
never a friend in sight,
miserable, it's been years.
Savage pain, it's torture,
always hungry, going mad with it.
How does he stand it?

Men, mortal men, you are wretched though you're wily.
Oh, your life is without measure.

Suffering endlessly this incurable agony,
 he's got no one,
 just the beasts around him,
 and his echo:
 calling, calling, calling back to him,
 back from the distance.

NEOPTOLEMUS (*speaking*)
 His suffering is not an accident, but sent from the gods.
 It is the divine plan to keep him here,
 until he is fated to cast his invincible arrows against Troy and
 raze it down.

(*A sound is heard*)

CHORUS (*Speaking*)
 Son of Achilles, be quiet...!
 (*Singing*)
 Listen: a sound of someone lost in pain. *io, io!*
 Again I hear it, crawling in agony, *io, io!*
 cries of anguish, unmistakable though far away. *io, io!*
 This song of suffering I know. *io, io!*

(*Speaking*)
 Child, get ready. He'll be here soon.
 (*Singing*)
 The man is getting near,
 not fiddling away like a shepherd.
 He is howling,
 you can hear it far and wide.
 Stumbling home,
 racked by pain.
looo, iooo!

(*End of Song*)

Enter PHILOCTETES, with bow and arrows

DANCING WITH PHILOCTETES

PHILOCTETES

Oh!

Who are you?

Did you come by sea? There's no harbor on this desolate place.

Your uniform looks Greek, my uniform.

I want to hear your voice.

Please, don't be scared.

I look savage, I know, but please, have pity on me — I'm lonely,

I haven't seen a soul in years.

(CHORUS *audibly breathe in*)

Please speak. Please say something.

(CHORUS *audibly breathe out*)

NEOPTOLEMUS

We are Greeks, Sir.

PHILOCTETES

Oh, that sound... ! To hear it, after so long, and from such a
man as yourself.

Bless the wind that steered you to me.

Son, what brings you here? Tell me everything.

NEOPTOLEMUS

We're sailing home.

My name is Neoptolemus. I'm the son of Achilles.

PHILOCTETES

Son of the most beloved father!

Raised in Skyros... ?

How did you come upon *this* shore?! Where are you sailing
from?

NEOPTOLEMUS

From Troy.

PHILOCTETES

What? You weren't with us at the beginning when we set out
against Troy.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Were you on that first mission?

PHILOCTETES

Child, do you not know who I am?

NEOPTOLEMUS

How would I know you? I've never seen you before.

PHILOCTETES

You've *never* heard my name, or any stories about my
misfortune out here?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I haven't heard anything.

PHILOCTETES

I really am so hated, despised by the gods even,
that not a single word is said about me anywhere in Greece,
while I waste away.
But those who left me here... they keep their secret, and laugh
about me,
while my sickness grows worse by the day.
Oh, child, son of Achilles, I stand before you: Philoctetes.
You probably know me as Master of the Bow of Heracles.

(*Beat*)

I was a great warrior.
Yes, I was on my way to Troy with the bravest heroes in all of
Greece —
your father was with us —
but a god-sent snake bit me, setting my foot on fire.

I was consumed by that savage poison, and the Greek generals shamefully deserted me right here: Agamemnon and his brother, and Odysseus.

You hear this, kid? They dumped me here, all alone, and hit the road.

Sure, they left me a measly ration... I'd like to see them survive on that for ten years!

I had passed out from the pain, and when I woke up, I saw no one.

Kid, can you imagine?

(CHORUS *audibly breathe in*)

Not a ship, not a man in sight. Nothing——but pain.

(CHORUS *audibly breathe out*)

A whole island of pain just for me.

(*Beat*)

Well, that's just how it was, kid.

I found this little cave. I can take care of myself.

When it gets cold, I light up a fire... just like how they teach you in basic training, huh?

I have my bow to hunt wild doves out of the sky. They have some meat on them...

if you can drag yourself to where they fall.

I got everything I need here, except a cure.

Summer, winter, summer... ten years. Feeding my flesh to this greedy disease.

Odysseus and his buddies, I hope they rot—

NEOPTOLEMUS (*interrupting*)

I hate them too. They *are* shameless.

PHILOCTETES

What, *you* hate them?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Oh, I wish I could get back at them.

PHILOCTETES

Why, what did they do to you?

NEOPTOLEMUS (*reluctantly at first*)

I'll tell you. Yes,

I'll tell you exactly how they disgraced me.

After Achilles died —

PHILOCTETES (*interrupting*)

Wait!

Achilles — is *dead*?

NEOPTOLEMUS

He is. They say he was shot down by Apollo himself.

PHILOCTETES

Well, that's... an honor.

I'm so sad to hear this.

(Beat)

I'm sorry for your loss.

NEOPTOLEMUS

You have enough to worry about. Thank you, though.

*(Beat)*Well, Odysseus and Phoenix, my father's mentor, sailed to
Skyros, my hometown, and said —I don't know if they were lying — they said now that my father's
gone, I am destined to capture Troy. It will fall to no one
else.

I got on that ship right away, they didn't have to convince me
much. No, Sir.
I also wanted to see my father before the funeral. I had never
met him.
So I sailed to Troy.
And when I got there, the whole army flocked around me,
they said, "It's like seeing Achilles alive again."
But he was dead.
And so, after the funeral, I respectfully asked the commanders
in chief for my father's armor. That was my right.
And they said "Son of Achilles, you can take what's left of his
gear, sure. But his shield? Odysseus already has it."
I was so hurt, and angry. "This is outrageous! how dare you
give my arms to another man?!"
But Odysseus said he earned it fair and square, because he had
saved my father's body.
I wasn't there, he said.
I was furious. I lashed out, at all of them.
Then I left. I'm sailing back home.
That... son of a bitch Odysseus!
And his commanders. He will take orders from anyone.

Verse 1

CHORUS

We were there,
you better believe it,
everything he says
it's all true.
We swear, it was just like that.
To all gods' ears we swear, we were there.

PHILOCTETES

That rings so true. Your grudge and mine are the same.
Odysseus is such a manipulative bastard.
He'd say anything — he doesn't give a damn about honor, or
fairness.

I just don't understand, where was Ajax in all of this?

NEOPTOLEMUS

He was no longer alive. Otherwise, they would have never
stripped me of my shield.

PHILOCTETES

Ajax too is gone?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Yes.

PHILOCTETES

Dead and gone.

Tell me, what about Nestor? He's an old friend.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Philoctetes...

Nestor's not doing well, ever since he lost his son out there.

PHILOCTETES

(*sighs*)

And Patroclus? He was your father's closest friend.

(NEOPTOLEMUS *shakes his head*)

PHILOCTETES

Ahhhh. All the good men. (CHORUS *audibly breathe out*)

But Agamemnon lives. Odysseus lives —
of course he does. This world is unjust.

(*Beat*)

NEOPTOLEMUS

I'm putting Troy behind me.

That army is morally corrupt. I cannot serve where the core is
rotten.

I'm going home to Skyros, to live my life there.

I'm off now.

(To CHORUS) To the ship.

(To PHILOCTETES) Farewell. May the gods give you health.

PHILOCTETES

You're leaving already?

NEOPTOLEMUS

It's time we set sail, Sir.

PHILOCTETES

Child, I beg you, by your father, by your mother, by everything
you love:

don't leave me alone here! Please, take me with you.

I know I'm disgusting... but you can bear it. You've got a good
heart,

you know it's the right thing to do.

Throw me with the cargo, I don't mind,

wherever on board I'll trouble you and your men the least.

If you bring me back alive to my hometown, I might see my
own father again.

I wonder if he still lives... !

Come, it's right on your way home. Take me at least part of the
way!

Say yes, child. I'm your suppliant,

(*kneeling with obvious difficulty*)

I'm on my knees.

Don't leave me in this desolation, where men don't set foot.

Save me from this place.

Please.

Verse 2 (*Same melody as previous verse*)

CHORUS

Child, take pity on this man,
 don't refuse him
 that would be a sin.
 You know it's true, you know it's right,
 it's the way of the gods.
 Child, take pity on this man,
 as if it were I.

*(End of two-verse song)*NEOPTOLEMUS (*to* CHORUS)

Are you sure?
 At sea with this man and his foot, you might feel differently.

(Beat)

Well, all right, then. It would be a disgrace if I seemed less
 willing than you all.
 (*To* PHILOCTETES) Okay. Gods help us.

PHILOCTETES

Oh! The day has come. You sweet, sweet man,
 and you, my beloved shipmates — I can't express how much
 this means to me.
 We're going, son!
 But first, I'll say goodbye to my so-called home here.
 And I'll show you around: come see how I managed in this
 place where I was forced to survive.

Intervention (*Distinct rhythmic delivery, not sung*)

CHORUS (*interrupting their movement.*)

Son of Achilles, you cannot delay. Don't forget...

NEOPTOLEMUS

What?

CHORUS

What some of us have heard. Remember?

PHILOCTETES

What do they mean?

(*To CHORUS*) Why are you whispering?

CHORUS

The prophecy.

They're after you.

PHILOCTETES

(*To CHORUS*) Who? (*To NEOPTOLEMUS*) What?

NEOPTOLEMUS (*to CHORUS*)

Tell me this rumor you've heard of.

Whatever you can say to me you can say to him. We're friends:
we share the same enemies.

CHORUS

You should hurry. This is what we heard:

Odysseus and his men are after you, both.

At Troy, he held a prophet prisoner,
that Odysseus, like a war prize, he was boasting.

The prophet said, "without Philoctetes, you will never capture
Troy.

You must convince him to come here from Lemnos."

And Odysseus, that arrogant snake, promised to get this man
and bring him back to the Greeks.

“If I can’t persuade him, I’ll drag him here by force. You have my word!”
And you, young man, are also needed at Troy. They’re after you too.
You both better hurry.

(End of Intervention)

PHILOCTETES

Persuade me?! That man...

Drag me to Troy?!?!? No.

I’d rather stoop down and kiss the snake that bit me.

That man, he’d say anything, he’d do anything.

(To CHORUS) Thanks for telling me.

(To NEOPTOLEMUS) Let’s go, son. We need to get going, right now.

NEOPTOLEMUS

But the wind is, uh, against us now.

PHILOCTETES

Kid, it is *them* against us.

NEOPTOLEMUS

The wind will also hold them back.

PHILOCTETES

No wind ever held back a pack of pirates.

NEOPTOLEMUS

All right. Get what you need.

PHILOCTETES

Just an herb I use on the wound. It helps with the pain.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Bring it.

PHILOCTETES

I also need to collect my arrows. I can't leave any of those behind.

NEOPTOLEMUS

And that... is —
is that your bow?

PHILOCTETES

This is it. The one and only.

(Beat)

It belonged to Heracles.
You remember how he died?
His body ravaged by the Centaur's venom, he longed to be
delivered from his mortal suffering through purging fire.
His son would not light the pyre.
Only I would do it.
I set him on fire so that his pain would stop.
And for that act of friendship, he gave me his divine bow.
This bow.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Could I... get a closer look?
May I try it on?

PHILOCTETES

Sure, kid. What's mine is yours.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I would like to, very much. But only if it's... right.

PHILOCTETES

It's right, kid, it's well and good.
Because you, only you,
gave me the gift of this day.
You are taking me back home, to my father.
You have brought me back to life.
Go ahead, hold this bow. Try it on, then give it back to me.

(Hands NEOPTOLEMUS the bow)

And you'll be able to say,
"Philoctetes and I were the only mortals to ever touch this
 weapon."
Because of your courage.

NEOPTOLEMUS

You are a true friend.

(PHILOCTETES steps away)

NEOPTOLEMUS

Shall we?

(PHILOCTETES sits with his back to Neoptolemus, breathing heavily)

NEOPTOLEMUS

Are you... okay?

(PHILOCTETES doesn't respond)

NEOPTOLEMUS

What's the matter?

PHILOCTETES

Nothing, kid, let's go.

DANCING WITH PHILOCTETES

NEOPTOLEMUS

You aren't in pain, are you?

PHILOCTETES

... No! I feel better actually.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Why are you...

PHILOCTETES (*sharply*)

Oh gods!

NEOPTOLEMUS

What is going on with you? Tell me! Clearly something is wrong.

PHILOCTETES

Kid, I can't hide it from you anymore.

I feel it coming... (*breathing heavily*)

It's like an arrow shooting... shooting through me...

I'm being eaten alive!

You have a sword, kid — cut off my heel, now!

(*Frantic*) Come on, boy, do it!

NEOPTOLEMUS

What is this? Suddenly, out of nowhere —

PHILOCTETES (*speaking with great difficulty*)

Kid, don't you... ?

NEOPTOLEMUS

What?

PHILOCTETES

Don't you see?

NEOPTOLEMUS
WHAT?!

PHILOCTETES
This is *it*. (*Writhes in excruciating pain*)

NEOPTOLEMUS
Your pain...

PHILOCTETES
You cannot even imagine. But —

NEOPTOLEMUS (*interrupting*)
What... how...? Is there anything I can do?

PHILOCTETES
— have pity on me!
Don't be scared. And don't leave me.
It comes and goes, this pain.

NEOPTOLEMUS
(*To CHORUS*) Oh, man.
So much... so much misery.
(*To PHILOCTETES*) Here, let me help you.

PHILOCTETES (*frantic*)
No! Don't touch me.
But hold on to my bow, until this attack passes. Guard it well.
When this pain is over I'll fall asleep. Let me sleep, I'll feel
better when I wake.
But if *they* arrive, DO NOT let them have my bow.
If you do, you're done for: you and I both.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Don't worry. No one will touch it but you and I.

DANCING WITH PHILOCTETES

PHILOCTETES

May it not bring you the suffering it brought to us: first
Heracles and then me.

NEOPTOLEMUS

May the gods help us all.

PHILOCTETES

I feel it coming on again.

(Screams frighteningly) Fucking foot!!!

If only such pain would pierce Odysseus's heart!

Child, set me on fire, like I did for Heracles!

Come on, do it!

NEOPTOLEMUS *(Horried. Speechless)*

(to CHORUS) What are we going to do with him?

(Long beat)

PHILOCTETES *(breathing heavily)*

It'll be okay, kid. The worst is over now.

Promise me: don't leave me.

NEOPTOLEMUS *(taking a step toward him)*

We're staying.

PHILOCTETES

Really? *(Stretches his hand out)*

NEOPTOLEMUS

You have my word. *(Shakes his hand)*

PHILOCTETES

I'm just going to lie down here.

Just...

(Lies down and closes his eyes)

NEOPTOLEMUS

He's falling asleep.

He looks horrible. And his foot... it's all mangled.

Shhhhh.

Let's let him rest.

Song

CHORUS

Sweet Sleep, sweet painless sleep,

come gently, kiss his eyes shut.

We call upon you, peaceful Sleep:

Come,

come calm and healing,

breathe silence in him.

This is our prayer.

Think now, child, what is next, where you are going and
why.

We're ready, he's sleeping.

Now is the time, we can win this.

What are we waiting for?

It's time to go.

NEOPTOLEMUS

He hears nothing, but I see clearly

this bow we poached is useless without him.

The gods said,

he is the conquering hero.

No lie, no boast, no trick will hide it:

Our monster face forever in the mirror.

CHORUS

Keep your voice down, sleep in pain is easily disturbed.

Child, the gods' ways we cannot know.

To steal away from here is now our job,
while he lies there, half-dead.
There is no painless answer here.
But the wind, the wind is with you, boy,
Don't miss this opportunity: so simple, so easy.

(End of song)

NEOPTOLEMUS

Be quiet. Keep your heads on.
He's stirring.

PHILOCTETES

Light after darkness! Is this a dream? Friends, you kept watch
over me?
Child, I never believed you'd show me such compassion.
Your superiors didn't dare stay with me.
But you, you have true virtue, like your parents.
You remained, unflinching, despite my stench and my screams.
I'm alright now.
Help me up, kid, let's go. We can't delay anymore.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I'm glad to see you're better. I thought you were about dead.
Come, on your feet. Or should my men help you up?

PHILOCTETES

No, no. They'll have enough of me on the ship. Would you,
please... ?

NEOPTOLEMUS

All right. Lean on me.

PHILOCTETES

Steady... that's it.

NEOPTOLEMUS
(Frantically groans)

PHILOCTETES
What is it, son?

NEOPTOLEMUS
I don't know what to say.

PHILOCTETES
No, no, child, what's the matter?

NEOPTOLEMUS
What am I going to do?

PHILOCTETES
The stench, it's bad, I know. Nauseating.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Everything is nauseating when you go against your nature.

PHILOCTETES
You're doing fine.

NEOPTOLEMUS
I'm a fraud.

PHILOCTETES
What... ?

(Beat)

(To CHORUS) This man tricked me.
(To NEOPTOLEMUS) You are going to leave me here.

NEOPTOLEMUS
No, not leave you. But you won't like where we're going.

DANCING WITH PHILOCTETES

PHILOCTETES

What do you mean, kid? I don't understand.

NEOPTOLEMUS

You need to sail to Troy to join the Greek army.

PHILOCTETES

What?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Wait, listen.

PHILOCTETES

What is there to listen to?

NEOPTOLEMUS

You are going to be healed. And then you and I will take down
Troy.

PHILOCTETES

Oh, really?

NEOPTOLEMUS

There's no other way. Listen, don't be angry.

PHILOCTETES

Give me back my bow.

(Beat)

NEOPTOLEMUS *(avoiding eye contact)*

I can't.

I'm... following orders.

PHILOCTETES

You monster, you conniving rat!
What have you done to me!?
Have you no shame?

(CHORUS *step in, surrounding* PHILOCTETES)

Son of Achilles... !?!

You shook my hand, and now your hand holds the sacred bow
of Heracles?

You want to show it off to your commanders?

You want to take me to Troy!?

You'll be taking a dead man, smoke's shadow.

(*Beat*)

Give it back. Come on.

Please, I'm begging you, don't take my bow!

I'm going to die here, my flesh feeding the beasts that I used to
hunt,

because of a man who *seemed* to know no evil. You —

(NEOPTOLEMUS *turns back to look at* PHILOCTETES)

CHORUS

Sir?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I feel for this man...

PHILOCTETES

Have pity, child. You're not a thief.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Arrr! I wish I had never left Skyros.

DANCING WITH PHILOCTETES

PHILOCTETES

It's not your fault. Evil men have trained you.
Sail away, but leave me my weapon.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Men, what should I do?

(Enter ODYSSEUS)

ODYSSEUS

Stand back! This idle talk of evil.
Give me his bow!

PHILOCTETES

(recognizing the voice) Odysseus... !?

ODYSSEUS

Here I am.

PHILOCTETES

You're behind all of this.

ODYSSEUS

No one else.

PHILOCTETES

(To NEOPTOLEMUS) Child, give me back my bow.

ODYSSEUS

Not gonna happen.
You're sailing with us, and your weapon too. We'll drag you by
force if necessary.

PHILOCTETES

Drag me by force? You shameless animal.

ODYSSEUS

Come willingly then.

PHILOCTETES

Lemnos! He wants to drag me away from you.

ODYSSEUS

Zeus rules this land, and this is his decree. I serve Zeus.

PHILOCTETES

You dare speak in the name of the gods?

ODYSSEUS

I do their will. We all heard the prophet. You must come.

PHILOCTETES

No.

ODYSSEUS

Yes. Obey.

PHILOCTETES

I am not your slave.

ODYSSEUS

No. You're one of us.

Come raze Troy to the ground with me.

PHILOCTETES

Never.

I'd sooner throw myself in the ocean!

ODYSSEUS

Stop him.

(CHORUS *intercept him*)

PHILOCTETES

My hands, defenseless, hunted down
by this degenerate traitor.

You've tricked me again, but today you used this child as your
shield.

You're not worthy of him!

He follows your orders, but clearly he cannot bear them,
they're so foul.

You instructed him well in your evil ways.

And now you want to *drag* me from this shore, where you left
me to die, all alone?

Damn you, and the commanders you serve!

I set out on this war willingly — idealistic fool! — commanding
seven ships.

You tried to weasel your way out of it.

And now you want me back? What for?

Am I no longer a stinking cripple, too repulsive to have on
board?

Damn you all to hell!

I'll consider myself cured when I see you all dead.

ODYSSEUS

I'll just say one thing:

I know how to adapt.

Don't talk to me about serving this war. I'm here to win.

But to you, I gladly cede.

Let him go. Leave him.

Who needs you? We have your weapon.

We've got other skilled archers at our command.

I could operate your bow, and win the glory that was meant for
you.

PHILOCTETES

Arrrrr!! *You*, wielding *my* weapon,
for the entire Greek army to see?

ODYSSEUS

Enjoy strolling on this Lemnos of yours!
(*To* NEOPTOLEMUS *and* CHORUS) Get moving.

(NEOPTOLEMUS *and* CHORUS *start moving toward the exit*)

PHILOCTETES

Son of Achilles, you are leaving? You're okay with this?!
Say it to my face!

ODYSSEUS

Keep walking. (*To* NEOPTOLEMUS) And stop looking at him!
You really are too good for this job.

(ODYSSEUS *exits as* NEOPTOLEMUS *walks behind him*)

PHILOCTETES

You're all leaving me? Have you no hearts?

CHORUS

The kid is our commander. We follow him.

NEOPTOLEMUS

He'll say I'm too soft-hearted...
but stay a while longer with him. We'll get the ship ready for
sailing.
In the meantime maybe he'll change his mind.
We both are outta here. Be at the ready. (*Exits*)

Song

PHILOCTETES

You hollow rock, my cave,
I was never meant to leave you.
My shelter from spraying sea and scorching sun,
my pain-filled home.

You birds, come from on high,
on the sharp breath of air,
see me die.

CHORUS (*rhythmic intonation*)

You, and no-one else, are responsible for this misery,
you had a choice, you choose to stay,
ill-fated one.

PHILOCTETES

It's all over now.

Those smooth-talking tongues,
they stripped me bare,
robbed me of my bow, my beating heart.
I've got nothing except this dead flesh
and the echoes in my head.

CHORUS (*rhythmic intonation*)

If you are doomed, you're doomed by god.
Don't blame us, we're your friends,
ill-fated one.

PHILOCTETES

No, no, no...

he is laughing, showing off his prize.

O Heracles!

I failed you. Violated by that filthy hand,
your bow in the grip of my enemy.

CHORUS (*joining the song*)

He is not your enemy. It's just orders he follows and gives.
Protecting his men, he toils for a greater cause.

PHILOCTETES

Oh beasts I used to hunt...

CHORUS

For gods' sake, man, come with us.

PHILOCTETES

Come, eat me alive...

CHORUS

Alone here you won't survive.

(Singing together):

PHILOCTETES

Soon I'll be dead.

CHORUS

Soon you'll be dead.

(End of song)

PHILOCTETES

Why are you doing this to me?

CHORUS

What do you mean?

PHILOCTETES

Why take me to Troy?

CHORUS

We believe that it's best.

PHILOCTETES

Get away from me!

CHORUS

There's nothing we would want more.

Let's go!

Back to our stations on board.

DANCING WITH PHILOCTETES

PHILOCTETES

Wait!

Please, don't go!

CHORUS

Come with us.

PHILOCTETES

Never!

Not even if Zeus himself comes blazing out of the sky to get
me.

To hell with Troy,

to hell with the entire Greek force laying there in ambush!

(Beat)

But... just one thing before you leave.

CHORUS

What?

PHILOCTETES

You have a sword, an axe? Whatever you got...

CHORUS *(suspicious)*

Why?

PHILOCTETES

Hack off these hands, this head of mine!

CHORUS

What... ?

PHILOCTETES

Help me join my father. He is surely dead.

He sent his son off to fight for the Greeks, my enemies.

They killed me.

(*PHILOCTETES slumps on the ground; he can't hear the following dialogue between NEOPTOLEMUS and ODYSSEUS*)

ODYSSEUS (*offstage*)

Where do you think you're going?

NEOPTOLEMUS (*enters holding the bow*)

To undo this terrible mistake.

ODYSSEUS (*enters*)

What are you talking about?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Listening to you! Telling shameful lies.

ODYSSEUS

What are you doing?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Giving back the bow—

ODYSSEUS (*interrupting*)

Don't you dare.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Which I shamefully took from Philoctetes.

ODYSSEUS

Don't taunt me, son of Achilles.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Are you taunted by the truth?

ODYSSEUS

This truth is dangerous.

DANCING WITH PHILOCTETES

NEOPTOLEMUS

Get ready, then.

ODYSSEUS

Watch it, lieutenant.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Or what?

ODYSSEUS

I am your commanding officer.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Your orders are wrong. I'm making things right.

ODYSSEUS

You're undermining the safety of the entire Greek army.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I'm not afraid of your army.

ODYSSEUS

We're at war with you, then, not the Trojans.

NEOPTOLEMUS

So be it.

ODYSSEUS

I am reporting this. You will be disciplined by the same army
that you scorn.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Go ahead! (ODYSSEUS *exits*)

Philoctetes!

PHILOCTETES (*getting up*)

What is this noise?

(*To CHORUS*) What do you want?
(*Sees NEOPTOLEMUS*) Oh, no.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Listen —

PHILOCTETES (*interrupting*)
I've listened to you once before.

NEOPTOLEMUS
I've come to make things right.

PHILOCTETES
Why should I believe you now?

NEOPTOLEMUS
Do you want to stay here, or sail with us?

PHILOCTETES
Stop talking.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Just listen for a second!

PHILOCTETES
No. You have robbed me of my life.
You come to give me advice now?
Damn you! You're a disgrace to your father's name.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Here is your bow.

PHILOCTETES
Is this another trick?

NEOPTOLEMUS
No, by Zeus.

PHILOCTETES

(Takes the bow, starts to draw it)

Is Odysseus still near? This arrow is for him.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Stop it. Remember who you are.

PHILOCTETES

I remember who he is: coward!

NEOPTOLEMUS

Enough. It's down to the two of us now.

Listen. You've gone too far.

Men suffer: that's a fact.

But to choose to inflict suffering on yourself, that is perverse.

You think everyone is out to get you, but I'm speaking as a friend.

You are infected with a divine poison, and you will never be cured, unless you come of your own free will to Troy.

There, Apollo's medicine will heal you.

You will shoot Troy down with these very arrows, and you and I will be hailed victors.

We all heard it prophesied by the captive priest:

Troy will fall before the year is out.

Come with us. You will earn fame, and health, and eternal glory.

PHILOCTETES

This life of mine, when will it end... ?

You call this friendly advice?

You think I can yield to you now, and hold my head high again at Troy?

Look those commanders in the eye, stand by their side? Stand by *Odysseus's* side?

These men are evil.

Why do you urge me to join them? Why would *you*, after they stripped you of your father's shield?

No, child. Do what you promised and take me home.
 And go home yourself, leave those cowards to die their ignoble
 deaths.
 You're better than them.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Do you not trust the words of the gods' prophet? Do you still
 not trust *me*?

PHILOCTETES

I am not going to Troy.

NEOPTOLEMUS

You will be healed there.

PHILOCTETES

Stop it.
 There is *nothing* there for me.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Why are you being so stubborn?!

PHILOCTETES

They killed me once. I won't let them do it again.

(*Beat*)

NEOPTOLEMUS (*exasperated*)

Fine. If you want to keep living like this... there's nothing more
 I can say to you.

PHILOCTETES

Let me suffer what I must suffer.
 But you gave me your word, son. Take me home.
 Come on, no more talk of Troy.
 I've sung enough blues out here to last a thousand Trojan wars.

(*Beat*)

NEOPTOLEMUS

All right. I'll take you home.

Let's go.

(PHILOCTETES *is incredulous, then overjoyed*)

Song

PHILOCTETES

Lemnos, I'm leaving you,

Goodbye, home.

Goodbye, water-nymphs!

Goodbye, crashing waves.

Oh cave, you've sheltered me from howling winds.

Oh craggy cliffs, you've echoed back my stormy cries.

I can't believe I'm leaving you for good.

Farewell, Lemnos,

you island of sounds and sorrow.

(*End of song*)

NEOPTOLEMUS

Philoctetes, I'm scared.

The Greek army will be after me.

PHILOCTETES

After *us*, yes. But we can fight them.

We have the invincible bow of Heracles.

CHORUS (*slowly surrounding PHILOCTETES*)

Heracles was a great warrior. He delivered Greece from
monsters and terror.

He was a hero.

PHILOCTETES

At the end of his life, he suffered, like me.
He gave me his weapon because I helped him end his pain.

Song

CHORUS (*closing in on PHILOCTETES*)

And in return you have suffered plenty.
Heracles is remembered for his deeds, not his suffering.
He was a great Greek warrior.
He left you his weapon for good: put an end to this war.

(The CHORUS start moving PHILOCTETES away from the island. He tries to resist but realizes he cannot, they are too many. They continue to sing)

Philoctetes, you are one of us. We are your home.
Greece calls to you!
Put an end to your suffering, like you did for Heracles.
It is time.
Time to raze to the ground the standards of Troy.
It is time.
We will hold you up, and you will shoot them down.
Where's the pain in that?
Let's go.

(End of song)

(All exit)

END

Dancing with Philoctetes

1. Mortal Men, You Are Wretched Though You're Wily

I am on my way to get the COVID-19 vaccine. The appointment I managed to book is way out in rural Saxony, an almost two-hour drive away. In my current lifestyle, where distances are measured by bike ride and are of seven minutes on average, this appointment is very far. So far that the distance feels mentally insurmountable. A Red Cross vaccination center in the middle of nowhere: what kind of place will I find when I get there?

It is raining almost the entire drive. In moments when it clears up and the eye can focus farther than the drops hitting the windshield, I am struck by the starkness of the bright spring-green patches against the dark steel sky. Every once in a while, a field of dazzling mustard yellow, almost neon. My husband, in the passenger seat, is holding my phone, reading aloud text messages sent from my contacts back home, in Israel. Here's a link to a fundraiser for a bookstore razed down in Gaza. My mother tells me she and my father do not go out to the common safe space in the stairwell when the sirens go off. They remain in the apartment, close to the front door. I've put yoga blocks by the door to sit on, my mother writes.

When are we going back to Chicago? my kids periodically ask me. My American-born boys, their mother tongue is not their mother's, nor is it the local one. They've lived in Germany for most of the younger one's life, but still consider this place not quite home. They know they are not from here. Yet German flows on their tongue far easier than it ever will on mine.

We don't have plans to do that at the moment, I answer.

* * *

I was surprised you didn't start from *Philoctetes*, my advisor tells me after my dissertation defense. In our institution, the defense is not only a public display of sufficient knowledge in one's field, but also, traditionally, a ritual opportunity to narrate how the dissertation came to be. In this crowning moment of a student's academic career, she is invited to give the audience a peek behind the scenes of the process of research and writing: the coincidences and vague hunches recast as choices, the aimless wandering and occasional dead ends as a smooth, linear progression towards where we now find ourselves. Yes, Sophocles' *Philoctetes* kept throbbing underneath the meandering currents of my scholarly life. You could say it is the play that brought me to graduate school to begin with; the dynamics of compassion, suffering, and language in this tragedy are paradigmatic of the questions that shaped my research. *Philoctetes* was undeniably the beating heart of my dissertation.

But when presenting in retrospect how my work came together, the point where I claimed it all began was not *Philoctetes*, but Sophocles' most famous play, *Oedipus the King*. I did so because I had the opportunity, as (an unusual) part of my graduate studies, to direct a stage production of *Oedipus*. This experience was quite unlike anything else I did as a student, and was crucial in shaping my academic project. I knew from the start that I was interested in the Sophoclean chorus, but only through having to solve for myself the dramaturgical and choreographic "problem" of putting a group of seemingly superfluous bodies onstage — people who react to the events,

express misguided optimism at the most incongruous moment, and lament Oedipus's fate, as well as their own — did I truly realize how dramatically pregnant this community of vocal witness-bearers is. Working on transforming the script into a performance was a turning point in my engagement with Sophocles, coalescing what I had learned about his plays and my own interests and intuitions about them into a tangible, clear perspective. I came to view the community's involvement in and reaction to an individual's tragedy as an essential theme in Sophoclean drama, and, more than that, the exploration of people's ability or inability to be with another person's pain as one of its driving forces. That is how the problem of empathy — of *listening* as a radically empathic stance — became the defining question, or net of questions, in my reading of Sophoclean dialogue: Can an empathically intended response ever be satisfactory to the one who suffers? When a person or a group react to another who is in the throes of emotional or physical pain, how does it sound?

As far as physical suffering goes, no tragedy is more explicit than *Philoctetes*, which showcases a Trojan War hero writhing in pain, screaming, whining, pleading for his life, and cursing his enemies and his own fate. In contrast to the genre-defining, more famous Oedipus, Philoctetes is blameless, or, more accurately, it is unclear whether he actually committed an offense against some minor deity. This possibility is hinted at in Sophocles' version only to highlight that Philoctetes' misdeed is incommensurate with his consequent suffering. What stands out about Philoctetes is precisely the experience of senseless, inhuman, unbearable suffering that he nonetheless endures. Almost as soon as pain strikes him, through an incurable venomous snakebite to the foot, he is also ex-communicated, for he is a threat to the integrity of the society around him. His wound gives off a nauseating stench, and his constant screams of pain disturb any attempt to conduct normal religious ceremonies. His body and its excretions — not just the discharge from his wound but his very voice — are uncontainable; they spill over in excess.

In *Philoctetes*, society is compelled to come in close contact with the sick individual, with his excruciating pain and all the traumatic experiences of the body and the soul that reverberate within and around sickness. Yet paradoxically, Philoctetes' disease cannot physically infect anyone; it is a monstrosity that cannot be shared. Indeed, it is entirely his disease: it defines his identity and existence throughout the ten long years he spends on the deserted island Lemnos. At one of the emotional peaks of the play, after a vicious spell of pain, Philoctetes demands empathy even as he insists that his suffering is inconceivable: "You cannot even imagine," he says, "but have pity on me!"

My adaptation of *Philoctetes* was performed in Leipzig in early March 2020, as COVID-19 was shaping up to be catastrophic, and just before Germany implemented drastic measures to contain the pandemic. Soon after the premiere, we realized we would not be able to complete our scheduled run. But even more obvious at that point was how pertinent the play had suddenly become in view of the global health crisis.

Philoctetes, so explicitly about empathy and pain, offered itself up as a litmus test not only for Sophocles' relevance, but for the value of theater tout court. The pandemic forced those of us with the privilege of health and security into a state of fervent, almost indulgent, self-reckoning; what could be more of-the-moment than Sophocles' depiction, through Philoctetes, of the undeniable ethical demand of empathy? Philoctetes shows us how physical suffering warps the soul and can only be bearable through the recognition of others. Yet even then it is barely bearable — and sometimes still unbearable. Philoctetes' is the ultimate plea to be-with despite all the reasons not to, and despite being-with not being enough.

As a huge Philoctetes-shaped void opened up in my life — where once were rehearsals and fittings, make-up tests and sound-checks, and people, so many people I used to hug, so many faces I used to kiss, things and people that were now banned, their absence pulsating like a phantom limb — I found myself sitting in the dark on the floor of my kids' bedroom,

waiting for them to fall asleep, stunned, exhausted, grieving, willing myself to believe that there is, there must be, a lesson in all this. Sophocles is your teacher, I tell myself. His characters are, well, not quite your friends, but they've been through a lot with you. You are used to thinking things through with them. Wait a while. Listen. Write about it. Go back to Sophocles and you will get an answer. You will feel it in your body.

But an answer failed to materialize. Philoctetes, I gradually registered, presented not a coherent response in the face of our global state of emergency, but rather an enigma. Sophocles gave me no tools to understand the imperative to stay away, to disconnect, to somehow demonstrate responsible empathy through a debilitating fear of contact. It was like reaching out to a religious authority, and returning with skepticism. There was no use for theater in those early days of the pandemic when every venture out of the house was a dip into gut-clenching panic. Stepping downstairs from our apartment to a necessary outdoor walk on a cold but mercifully sunny day, we find it hard to control our voices as we admonish the kids to just, please, don't touch the railing, just don't, don't touch, don't touch anything.

People who think this is all a hoax — people who are not seized by a mortal fear of COVID — I wonder, what kind of inflated sense of health do they have? Clearly, they have not seen a hospital from the inside. But how is it possible that disease has been held so far at bay for them, that they have never even had a loved one hospitalized? That they don't know how shitty it is?

Let me tell you something, I want to scream: it is utterly shitty.

It is sleepless nights. It is constant noise. Someone in earshot is moaning. Someone is vomiting. IV poles and medication trays drag on the linoleum floor. The lights are bright fluorescent, day and night. The mattress makes a faint crinkling noise when you sit down on it to squeeze a hand. It is a nurse searching for a vein for the nth time. Trimming fingernails or brushing hair, at once acts of devastating futility and utmost tenderness. It is boredom.

It is midnight phone calls and my mother rushing back there. Worry physically rocking my body into a bunch of rigid limbs attached to a hollowed-out ache in the center.

It is hospital-smell — not the odor of disinfectant or filtered air, but institution-cafeteria smell, suspended over everything like an itch. A waft of runny, joyless mashed potatoes, with that unmistakable trace of powdered onion. A once-fresh slice of cucumber, left out too long on the plate. After mealtime the trays are stacked up on a shelved wagon, waiting to be wheeled towards the kitchen somewhere in the belly of this depressing, elephantine building. I walk past them in the corridor, suppressing rage and helplessness and nausea. So many corridors — the way is long enough for me to tear up and then pull myself together before I reach your room.

* * *

When directing *Philoctetes* was only a fantasy of mine, years before this production in Leipzig materialized, I had in mind that the chorus of sailors would somehow transform at the end of the play into a group of women. The play is famously without female characters, but I dreamt up an ending where the chorus would appear as — reveal themselves to have been all along — the water nymphs to which Philoctetes bids goodbye at the very last scene. The audience would thereby acknowledge, with him, the softer sides of the island's wilderness. I imagined a shedding of grey and brown, armor and weapon and dirt flung off, cheerfully discarded, and a tinkling of turquoise and jade emerging instead, bubbling springs and rainbow light refracted, lovely forearms and smiles, a sigh of relief and a celebratory jig. An affirmation that if we just manage to peel off the tough outer layer, kindness will show itself, our miraculous true nature.

I did not definitively abandon that vision once directing *Philoctetes* became reality, rather gradually shifted away from it until a more pessimistic interpretation of the play fully unveiled itself to me. I did decide to include women in the chorus, but paradoxically, a joyous ending did not fit with this choice. The

casting decision was born primarily out of necessity: my goal was to produce a musical drama, but we were working with a limited pool of English-speaking actors who could also sing, so I didn't want to limit myself to an all-male chorus. My understanding of the play required that the chorus be a group large enough for them to apply believable pressure on the protagonists despite their lower rank — that the chorus, in other words, behave at least a little bit like a mob. They could not, say, be a delegation of three, and definitely not a lone actor standing in for the community: their power over Neoptolemus derives from their physical plurality. Their overpowering presence and the devastation of their lack of compassion towards Philoctetes are defining traits of their active engagement as a collective character in the play. Indeed, the dramatic crux is arguably the conflict between community and individuality, hence a credible collective was necessary. So, while a mixed-gender group gave us more vocal range and was easy to justify musically, it also became dramaturgically suggestive; after all, women can be part of a mob just as much as men. Including women as agents in this hyper-male play (not as voiceless nymphs or as an abstract idea of humanity, equally relegated to an appealing voicelessness) pushed me to define an ethical reading of the play as a whole. It unwittingly became one of the keys that unlocked my interpretation of its ending in particular, where the community prevails over the individual with devastating effects.

Unwittingly indeed: all through the early stages of the production, I was so committed to highlighting the play's treatment of disease and empathy that I did not fully realize we were creating a world of, *mutatis mutandis*, toxic masculinity — until it was embodied right there in front of my eyes. Nowhere did the play's centering of masculinity, its treatment of the specifically male body, become more obvious to us than when working on the only scene that consistently made us laugh: the handing over of the bow. When Philoctetes starts glorifying his weapon, it is Neoptolemus's chance to get his hands on it. This is a pivotal gesture in the progression of the plot (in both senses of the term), a moment of dramatic importance that cannot be over-

stated. When embodied, this concretization of heroic prowess, the physical transfer of manliness, became rife with erotic undertones. Yearning for the bow, Neoptolemus asks “May I try it on?” (p. 40).¹ In rehearsals it was at first “can I touch it?” a literal translation of the Greek, but a version that could never be delivered without explosions of laughter from the actors. It took being in a rehearsal room with a dozen other people for me to realize that this play revolves around one giant dick.

For the main characters, I cast a trio: Em Wessel, Laura Shann, and Felix Kerkhoff. Em, the youngest of the three, was a clear choice for Neoptolemus. They brought their strong, supple voice and a bright-eyed idealism to the role. In callbacks among the three actors, Laura’s Odysseus had a particular depth. Her depiction managed to make him believable as a man striving for a cause greater than any one individual, while maintaining a proper level of terrifying sleaze. Beyond her talent and experience as an actor, it was probably also Laura’s real-life yearlong friendship with and motherly affection for Em that laced her depiction of Odysseus’s opportunistic manipulation with a sense of horror; the betrayal was shameless, and personal. That Odysseus was played by a cis woman, Philoctetes by a cis man, and Neoptolemus by a non-binary person afforded more depth to the existential crisis of the young protagonist, forced as he is to choose between the two “father figures” and models of heroism that Odysseus and Philoctetes embody. In hindsight, working with actors of different genders allowed us to subtly represent toxic masculinity as a community-wide problem, a problem that every *body* is a part of. Indeed, the act of undercutting the audience’s conditioned (if unconscious) assumption that normative female bodies are receptacles and media of empathy — i.e., the act of having a woman portray Odysseus — arguably contributed to what we were trying to do: question how, and if, empathy can work. For, in effect, we were representing a world where

1 Page references are to the text of Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*, in this volume.

empathy is frustrating, confusing, nearly unreachable, and, even when reached, limited in its effect.

* * *

In the days leading up to the premiere, I have dreams about dancing: I am crossing the stage diagonally with a series of grand jetés in a blinding dazzle of projector lights. I am late for my cue. I am the stagehand in the coulisses and something is not working properly. Nothing is working properly. Everybody is late for their cue.

I am back at the ballet studio. I am walking through an empty warehouse-like stage, planning, giving instructions, choreographing.

I am with my sister.

Now, more than a year later, I have a self-imposed deadline to finish this book which is, purportedly at least, about Philoctetes. I am, again, starting from Philoctetes. Coming back to the memories, the smells, the retellings, the made-up self-narratives. The visceral experiences.

Coming back to the literal deadline.

* * *

To have an older sibling is to be born into a world that contains — no, is defined by the existence of — your sibling. There is no reality without them. There is not supposed to be.

My sister and I used to go to the dance studio every afternoon. She was five years my elder and a few levels ahead of me, so we never took the same classes. Her body was better suited to ballet (except that she was too tall) — she was naturally more flexible, and the arch of her foot was higher, which gave her a very beautiful pointe. I was one of those girls everyone knew would never actually become a dancer. I had really bad turnout, neck perpetually tensing up at difficult moves, ribs sticking out,

proportionally long waist and limbs. (Short people, my sister once explained to me, have less body to shift around: this makes things easier for them.) But I was also obviously clever and had a good ear for rhythm, so, for the most part, the teachers did not ridicule me. To be seen by them was the validation I longed for, to have one of them direct her gaze at me for more than a split second and send my way a *knee out!* or an *up, up, up!* or, gods almighty, a *yes!* One time, the most terrifying of the bunch ran her long fingernails on my thighs over and over again while I stood on my toes so that I would stretch my legs more-more-more, leaving red marks that were still visible after class. She saw me, oh blessed joy. To endure the pain it takes to become a little more ballerina-like was not a means: in the absence of a fighting chance to actually be a dancer, it became the goal itself. That I loved to dance was self-evident but beside the point.

It's all I ever wanted, I tell a friend. We have been close since middle school; she knew me *then*. She is now my sounding board as I try to grasp the shapeshifting distance between my youth and my present self. This surge of regret: is it just a momentary lapse of perspective, like a spill that needs to be blotted? Or is it the unsaid yearning that has been there all along — perhaps sometimes it was said, yes, sort of (but never written) — and that has given the last two and a half decades whatever nonlinear coherence they will now, finally, be allowed to possess?

You hated it, she says, you were miserable.

I am shocked to hear her say this.

* * *

My parents are supportive of my desire to move to Paris for a year to study French literature. This is not part of a study abroad program or something similar, but a plan I hatch for the in-between time young Israelis customarily take after their military service and before they embark on the actual course of their adult life. My idea of time-off does not include back-packing, smoking weed, or contemplating sunrises, but rather to study before starting my BA studies. Among many obvious

flaws in this plan is the purposeful detachment from a scholarly program: I find myself academically clueless, drifting with a self-inflicted sense of temporariness through an institutional setting where I could not really excel because the language challenge was all-consuming (without which, though, it would have felt more or less like high school), and where no-one could care less about me one way or the other.

My parents figure that, at the very least, I will come out of it with seriously improved language skills, and those can always be translated into something practical. So they do not suggest that I reconsider — that this is a move too far — but they do try to gently open my eyes to the difficulty of the endeavor. My father tells me I might be lonely. What does that actually mean, I ask him (growing up youngest in a household of five, with two opinionated siblings, I am incapable of fathoming physical loneliness, whereas the oppressiveness of mental loneliness is anyway my constant, if unacknowledged, state of being). It means coming home to an empty house at night, and it's cold, and there's nothing to eat in the fridge, and you find the heating has broken down.

Admirable try, dad.

* * *

I write most of the chapter on Electra while pregnant with my second child. One October morning, I wake up early to a pressure on my pelvis. This might be it, I think. Many sleepless nights are coming, so I do not wake my husband yet. Our three-year-old is also still sleeping; in contrast to his soon-to-be brother, he was not the kind of toddler that started the day in the early dawn. I call my midwife. I think it's happening, I tell her, but I need to send a few emails first. She figures, she doesn't need to rush out yet, and decides to wait until after the heaviest hour of commuter traffic.

I sit down on the floor, legs crossed, my laptop on a low footrest. I skim over the paragraphs for typos and blatant non sequiturs. I compose an email to my dissertation committee

members. Attached is my chapter on Electra. My second child is coming any day now. Sincerely.

Three hours later, he is born.

I do not notice until writing this, that the birth of my youngest son was somehow the negative of a deadline. The time after which life is too pressing to ignore through preoccupation with other assignments. The time after which something demands to be born.

2. A Whole Island of Pain Just for Me

Let me try to start again, start from the beginning.

Philoctetes: the man on the island, the one who screams, the one who sings. The man who sings though all alone, whose screams are also songs, whose pain is as irrepressible as the wilderness that surrounds him, and as inescapably musical. He cannot help but be musical because of the inaccessibility of his suffering: when others hear it, this pain must be transformed. Through his pain we hear the irresistible and impossible translatability of his voice.

Philoctetes' pain is the key to the dramatic action but also what locks it in place. It is part of the music of his current landscape and a constant call back to his expulsion from the society of the Greeks, the society he will eventually be forced to rejoin against his will. His pain is the tough inner core and the ripples, the reverberation of and back to a previous space. It comes in waves, like the feeling when you mourn someone.

Indispensable and unfathomably absent from English is the word for it, the noun that would correspond to the verb in the

sentence *I miss you*. *Longing* and *yearning* won't cut it. Hebrew has a particularly effective equivalent: Ga-a-gu-ah. Ga'agu'ah. Breathe it out, gaaguah. Sigh, gaaguah. Let there be a small crying gasp in the middle of it.

Ga'

a

gu — ahhhh.

Philoctetes is a play about returning. Returning, even after it becomes clear that returning is not a viable option. It is about being stuck: physically, emotionally, mentally unable to move. It asks, but does not definitively answer, whether empathy can help us out when we are stuck.

Gaaguah: the choking feeling in your throat and chest as the wave washes over you, and the wave itself. (Resist. Resist the call to drown in gaaguah. Come back to Anglo-Saxon words whose sounds are farther from guttural.)

In the body of *Philoctetes*, Sophocles gave us the personification of the longing to return, and around that body he concocted a story: a story about Neoptolemus's conflicting loyalties, about how far he would or would not go to manipulate *Philoctetes*. Indeed, involving Neoptolemus in *Philoctetes*' fate was probably Sophocles' invention, not part of the received mythological tradition. As I think back on what were for me the three defining dramaturgical challenges in adapting this play, it is precisely the moments where *Philoctetes*' overwhelming presence intersects with the story, the moments that make of his presence a drama, an action with beginning, middle, and end. When I describe these challenges, as I will now proceed to do, philology and dramaturgy inevitably intertwine, as two complementary modes of engagement with the play.

How to *start with* *Philoctetes*? How to effectively introduce such a powerful character, so moving, so deeply compelling though he is stuck and radically grounded? *Philoctetes* enters before he is actually onstage, when the chorus make him heard for the first time, not surprisingly by singing rather than speak-

ing about him. Reverberating with his surroundings precisely because he is firmly fastened, Philoctetes is like a string, and the chorus strum him.

Echoes—the sound which marks itself as a non-beginning—are the first thing we hear of and about Philoctetes in this play. As the chorus members wax lyrical about Philoctetes' horrible plight, elaborately conjuring it based on the uninhabitable state of the island and the traces of destitution and discomfort he leaves about the place, they linger over Echo, his constant companion (pp. 28–29).

I pity him, think how
all alone, no one cares for him,
never a friend in sight,
miserable, it's been years.

[...]

Suffering endlessly this incurable agony,
he's got no one,
just the beasts around him,
and his echo:
calling, calling, calling back to him,
back from the distance.

In evoking Philoctetes' echo, the chorus's song inhabits the signature oxymoron of Philoctetes' being: his solitude becomes musical because of how utterly unmusical it is. His unimaginable and inexpressible suffering gives way to fantastical expressivity. The English rendition of our production rather straightforwardly echoes: *calling, calling, calling*. Yet Sophocles' Greek here ran wild with a neologistic description, *Echo of the doorless mouth*, one which at once anthropomorphizes the echo and drives home its disembodied nature. Philoctetes contends with a hallucinogenic trace of his own consciousness.

Adapting Sophocles' Greek onto the stage is also an exercise in tracing the disembodied back to ourselves. It is to take graph-

emes printed on a page — signs that we know represent a language we have never heard and will never hear, letters that have become disconnected from living and breathing mouths — and imagine them into the voices and bodies of actors. The choice to adapt the ancient text into a musical drama, while it stems from the centrality of song in the ancient performance context, required an additional imaginative leap, since we did not attempt to recreate the original sound but wanted to use instead contemporary musical idioms from popular Western genres. The melodies that musical director Matthew Hendershot wrote offered another layer of translation, one as fundamental to the adaptation as my English rephrasing of Sophocles' words. I also left Matthew a lot of leeway to rewrite the lyrics once we had reached an understanding of a song's purpose in the drama.

The first hurdle Matthew and I had to clear to get into the world of Philoctetes was to hear his echoing sounds. The Greek gives us only an eerie trace of this soundscape, but the trace is unmistakable. Through the chorus's song, through their ears, we hear Philoctetes approach. "Listen, a sound of someone lost in pain," they warn Neoptolemus as the third section of the *parodos* (the chorus's entry song) starts. In the original context, given the technicalities of ancient performance, the characters and audience members probably could not actually hear this sound beyond the sung words of the chorus. Yet we had the opportunity to make Philoctetes more sonically present. In Matthew's composition, the footsteps of Philoctetes *lost in pain* became a recurring percussion effect, a series of beats evoking a person slowly, barely, dragging themselves up a slope. This diegetic sound served as the structural pulse of the middle section of the *parodos*, the part where everyone actually listens out for Philoctetes (and sings about listening).

Another auditory perception of Philoctetes, no less definitive than his footsteps, are his shouts. These, however, we imagined as non-diegetic: to have him cry out from offstage, we agreed, would be too pathetic. In our collaborative rewriting of the song into English, Matthew and I significantly expanded the role of Philoctetes' shouts. In the Greek, the chorus sings of Philo-

ctetes' terrible cries as he approaches. They end the *parodos* by singing: *he shouts io* (ιώ, pronounced ee-oh). Philoctetes enters shortly after, and indeed, the first thing he says when seeing Neoptolemus and the chorus is *io*. We transferred this sound from the end of the choral song and from the spoken section which Philoctetes' cry originally introduced at this point, to the beginning of this sung section. (*Io*, in fact, was the only exclamation pronounced the same in the translation as in the original Greek.) The two foundational elements of the song were Philoctetes' noise as he moves and his *ios*, both of which we transposed from the unheard soundscape of the chorus's mimetic performance into the reality of their song and their own voices.

What we tried to accomplish was that the *parodos* would not just evoke Philoctetes' musicality, but add it concretely to the soundscape; the chorus not only sings *about* it but *sings it*. The *io* shout, in varying harmonic forms and in rhythmic variability, becomes the chorus's refrain as they try to discern exactly where Philoctetes is coming from. They repeat it at the end of the *parodos* as well, when they are done listening and are getting ready for action (p. 29).

| | |
|---|----------------|
| Listen: a sound of someone lost in pain. | <i>io, io!</i> |
| Again I hear it, crawling in agony, | <i>io, io!</i> |
| cries of anguish, unmistakable though far away. | <i>io, io!</i> |
| This song of suffering I know. | <i>io, io!</i> |

[...]

The man is getting near,
 not fiddling away like a shepherd.
 He is howling,
 you can hear it far and wide.
 Stumbling home,
 racked by pain.
Iooo, iooo!

The echoing song also motivated a dramaturgical interpretation of the space: while the chorus sing, they move around the space, listening out for Philoctetes. They step offstage and walk about the audience members, up to the top of the house, back to the area from which they had entered — from outside — and down again to the main stage. The repetition and malleability of *io* helped us define the musical-dramatic space as all-encompassing. At the same time, this composition and the chorus's movement served to underscore the blurred boundary between diegetic music and Philoctetes' all-pervasive presence. In the chorus's song, Philoctetes' existence — part fabrication, part traces and echoes — resounds onstage through and despite its absence. From this resonating all-around playing-space, Philoctetes emerges.

And once he's there, he's incontrovertibly present. This is a character that, after his entrance, remains onstage throughout the play; the only scene in which he does not take part is when he is lying on the ground unconscious. The pain attack, which leads to this temporary coma, is the moment at the center of the play when Philoctetes' stuck-ness becomes undeniable, and which defines him as a *hero in pain*. The challenge for the actors and me was to represent his immense pain without slipping into melodrama or grotesquery. But we needed to keep its loudness. The ubiquity of vocal suffering that Philoctetes radiates is precisely why empathy becomes a problem. We are now at the second challenge, the *middle* of the drama.

Neoptolemus had adopted Odysseus's lies and deceit, but the young man's spontaneous empathy towards Philoctetes became a wedge shoved into the flow of affected language, an interruption to the dramatic plot. In the face of language-effacing pain, empathy too is a disturbance to language, and, moreover, to action. Philoctetes' cries are a plea for vulnerability and frankness which turn empathy into a dramatic crisis. When Neoptolemus's empathic response finally comes, it reveals itself as the natural consequence of vocalizing and responding. But at the

same time it exposes the problem of listening-as-sounding, of listening as an expressive modality of empathy.

I want to remain with Philoctetes' pain for a while, though, and so it must be asked: How do people even scream in ancient Greek? Greek tragedy showcases quite an abundance of exclamatory cries of grief and distress, such as *feu*, *oimoi*, *papai* (and also *io*). *Oi* and its (in)versions probably sound familiar enough to our ears. But *papai* sounds nothing like what comes out of my mouth when I am in pain — a thought I once formulated out loud in a room full of philologists. In response, a professor remarked that *popo* is still used in modern Greek as an expression of discontent or sorrow. The great classicist and translator Nicholas Rudall has said (on a separate occasion, but again in relation to Philoctetes' favorite shout) that *papai* gives the actor a labial sound for the voice to push against. This explanation of the technical, expressive efficiency of the repeated *papais* in *Philoctetes* could also carry over to a contemporary expletive like *ffffffuck*. If all exclamations hearken back to some extent to the prelinguistic expressivity of emotions, in ancient Greek tragedy they also recall the genre's likely origin in lamentation. They are something for the voice to push against in the midst of trying to express — but also to contain, to organize, to make poetry out of — grief. Tragic exclamations are vestiges of keening, originally heard by an audience for which this auditory phenomenon was still alive. *Papai's* sonic fabric is rawness and musicality put together, and within that contradictory sonic space — that musical rawness of grief, of woe — it becomes exactly what comes out of your mouth when you are in pain.

Granted, all of ancient tragic diction was poetic, or inherently musical, whether or not it was actually sung in performance. Sung or not sung: that is how philologists customarily discuss different sections of Greek tragedy. A truer distinction, one corresponding to the ancient performance, would be whether a given section was delivered with or without instrumental accompaniment. Within the vocal performance of Greek drama, the song-speech division is actually a modern problem, a made-up one. For in the original context, the audience's ear

was far more likely to experience the continuum between song and speech, or music and non-music, than the divide between them. The performance of ancient drama enhanced the musical expressivity of language, stretching the entire range of vocal sound as music (as all poetic performance still does). Our obsession, as students of the classics, with discerning and separating the spoken and sung parts of ancient drama is rooted in the visual medium — the text — which is virtually always our first and often our sole access to the material. We pore over printed graphemes meant to conjure an entire spectacle and, since so much of it is alien to us, we hold onto what jumps out at us from the page. The visual medium offers a reduced misrepresentation that is quite mind-boggling if you think about it. (Imagine trying to understand what *Hamilton* is about if you could only read the script, stage directions removed.) As it is, no printed feature of ancient Greek drama is more distinct than the clearly visible transition from spoken dialogue to song — from repeated lines of the same syllabic length, almost always the comfortably predictable iambic trimeter, to lines of widely varying length inscribed with *strophe* and *antistrophe* on the side. It is comforting in its own way to know that you have read through the spoken dialogue and arrived at a song. Now, entire sections are riddled with transmission problems because even the scribes a millennium or two ago had trouble following: the sentence structure is too complicated, the images too densely packed with obscure mythological allusions, the metrical pattern too convoluted to read out loud in class.

Exclamations, for their part, have a fixed rhythm that can fit the iambic structure. Their metrical valence is seemingly identical whether they occur within the spoken line or outside of it (in the so-called *extra metrum* position, a distinction that, again, should matter much less than philologists make of it). But the performative truth is that tragedy's cries and screams, even as they are formally embedded in the trimeter of spoken dialogue, are a step closer to song than speech. Even as they become formulaic expressions, they are an echo of an outburst, of that raw-musical space of woe.

And here is Philoctetes, at first attempting to rein in his pain, to spare Neoptolemus its most shocking expressions and effects. But when Philoctetes lets go, it is in a series of exclamations that challenge the generic definitions of vocal expressivity, outbursts that scream within and against poetic formality. His most notorious shout stretches the basic medium of tragic dialogue, the iambic trimeter, even as it throws the syllabic division into sharp relief: *Papai apappapai papappapappapappapai!* Spilling over from one line to the next with its fourteen syllables, this is the epitome of uncontrollable yet contained pain. It is a musical tornado forced into the predictable mold of spoken dialogue, and would have been a performative tour de force. Embedded in barely-still-civil conversation, evocative of animalistic yelps, it is a condensed coloratura aria. When Philoctetes screams, he brings the tragic voice to its limit: to the boundaries of how an unbound expression of pain can nonetheless be notated.

As Lessing observed in his influential reading of the play,² Neoptolemus is there to mediate the horror of a body in pain through a pragmatic issue. Neoptolemus must decide how to react. Throughout the drama, he had to constantly choose to continue lying to Philoctetes, but the latter's extreme suffering made the choice to manipulate him so much harder. Philoctetes is a body consumed by *ratio*-effacing sensations, a body stripped down to its now — to the voice. We (audience and Neoptolemus as one) are faced with that irrepressible presence of a body whose very pulse is pain. But Neoptolemus keeps us aware that there is, *there must be*, a future to this overwhelming present. He will eventually make a choice, and that choice will be momentous; significantly, it is directly preceded by a *papai*, finally heard from his own mouth. But as long as Philoctetes is in pain, Neoptolemus can do nothing. He embodies the problem of reacting to pain — empathically, and at all.

2 See Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962)

Papai apappapai papappapappapappai!

How to translate this? How to perform this? How to find empathy towards it? How to *move on* from here?

What truth can come out of our mouths?

Philoctetes' pain is that of a man who wishes, in the moment, to cut off his foot, to set himself on fire — and he screams as much. Our goal was to strike the right tone with these screams throughout the scene, without caricature. While I had significantly shortened the scene relative to the Greek version, we still needed to stretch it vocally to the widest possible range; after all, there is only so much screaming one can do onstage and keep it effective. Indeed, the worst scream in the translated script is relatively unimpressive in print, though it is at least propelled by a labial drive similar to the original: "Fucking foot!" (p. 44).

To communicate an intensification of pain up to the great vocal outburst, that was the challenge. Felix's brilliant suggestion was that at the beginning of the pain attack, where the Greek text already breaks down into short exclamations, he would mark each spasm by a sharp intake of breath, without words or any other vocalized sound. Each breath created a clear break from the dialogue, an interruption to the shared presence of Philoctetes and Neoptolemus (Felix and Em). These audible breaths very much sounded like a man in agony, so much so that I would ask Felix if he was all right after every single rehearsal of that scene ("Yes, Abigail. I was acting."). The ultimate scream, while nothing like the elaborate flourish of the original, was hopefully emotionally and physically convincing in performative context as an explosive peak of vocal expression.

Using breaths instead of exclamations leading up to that point also allowed us an opportunity to visually represent Philoctetes' unsuccessful attempt to hide his suffering: at the onset of the pain, Felix turned his back to the audience (and Neoptolemus), so that the movement of his lungs through his tattered costume as he inhaled was strikingly visible. Philoctetes-in-Felix's body

became marked as such, as a body, orienting itself inwards. A vessel clothed in muscle and skin through which pain vibrates, a rib cage protecting an inaccessible interiority.

Neoptolemus's reactions were, unexpectedly for me, much harder to fine-tune. In speech, as the Greek has it, they felt wrong. Granted, Neoptolemus resists understanding what is obviously occurring before his eyes and ears. His initial and prolonged refusal to acknowledge Philoctetes' pain is precisely part of the dramatic event, so that letting him come off a little, shall we say, tone deaf, could have been entirely possible. Em and I decided to omit most of the character's text in favor of allowing Em to express confusion, shock, and fear through their body and facial expressions. In our version, Neoptolemus does not vocalize when Philoctetes is in pain, but is struck dumb by his paroxysm. Yet I regret that we did not give ourselves enough time to explore Em's reaction; perhaps we could have found an auditory solution through the breath for them as well. Such a solution could have also tied in with the use of breaths as an expressive medium for the chorus throughout the play (I have included these breaths as stage directions in the script, since to me they feel integral to the chorus's scored part: pp. 30, 32, 35). Audible breaths served us to express the inexpressible, a way to reach out from the stage to the audience through the silence of the theater. Breath: sound as presence, even in its incommunicability.

Neoptolemus's more substantial vocal and physical reaction must come later. Faced with Philoctetes' wave of sensation, he can only be sure that the choice he faces is impossible, because both options available to him are morally wrong: forcing Philoctetes back to fight alongside those who had once deserted him, or deserting him again on the island, with or without his bow (though the last is infinitely worse). To diffuse this impasse, Philoctetes must black out; an entire choral song needs to go by, in which Neoptolemus gets a chance to articulate his conviction in disagreement with the chorus, before any of the characters can literally move from the stage. But after this song, Neoptol-

emus helps Philoctetes to his feet. As he touches him for the first time, supporting the full weight of his body, Neoptolemus cries out (in Sophocles' original): *papai! what shall I do?* The quintessential tragic question, the intersection of morals and pragmatics is coupled with the echoing of pain, as literal an echo as possible.

The two men hold on to each other. Philoctetes' body reverberates through Neoptolemus's own body and voice. Neoptolemus opens his mouth, and sounds truly empathic for the first time — sounds empathy. Sophocles gives Neoptolemus one short echo of Philoctetes' scream. In our version, at this later point Em grunt-shouts in panicked frustration (p. 47). In the script printed here, a subtle behavioral echo (*frantic*) suggests an infectiousness between the two characters, with Neoptolemus now frantically reacting as Philoctetes did earlier (pp. 42–43). Perhaps, had we found an auditory breath for Em-Neoptolemus as an earlier reaction to Philoctetes' pain, it might have somehow flickered with an inchoate form of empathy, and could have anticipated this later echo of pain sonically as well.

A frantic groan. Neoptolemus's empathy is also his distress. It encapsulates the tragedy of listening: how to keep going after having listened to Philoctetes. Sophocles' Greek allows for a stretching of the fabric of dialogue through which empathy in its raw form glimmers. But therein lies the problem. Empathy stops us in our tracks.

* * *

Philoctetes' start, his absence, his presence, his destitution, his music, all of these things proved less fraught to adapt than his ending. Indeed, the end of the play is a notoriously unsatisfying conclusion among the extant tragedies. What is left of Philoctetes as he heads off the island? To answer this question, one must make sense of Heracles and how he changes the entire course of the drama. This is the third challenge of the story (beginning, middle, end).

Theatrically, Heracles is a temptation: an opportunity to endow the drama with meaning that goes beyond the individuals and their pains and grievances. Heracles gives us an unequivocal sense of grandeur, an overwhelming multi-sensorial experience, a flood of grace and reconciliation, a moment of the sublime. A spectacular moment, I thought at first; this would be a musical showstopper. Yet Heracles is not only a dramaturgical temptation, but a moral one as well. For here is the paradigmatic *deus ex machina*, a divinity to solve the ethical impasse in which the mere mortals have found themselves, an authoritative voice to dispel the argument and finally set the events back on their mythologically ordained track. Ultimately, it is a moral solution that I found untenable, and so I decided to remove Heracles' intervention entirely.

Until Heracles' appearance near the end of the play, nothing could win over the recalcitrant, utterly devastated Philoctetes, who has made it mind-bogglingly clear that he would rather stay on Lemnos to be eaten alive by birds than join Odysseus and the Greek army at Troy. He has become so thoroughly distrustful that the possibility of a renewed camaraderie with the Greeks is inconceivable, except for friendship with the one who might take him home, as Neoptolemus now agrees to do. Sophocles' text strongly marks the attempted exit of Neoptolemus and Philoctetes as an ending, since it is distinct from everything that came before it rhythmically — which is to say musically. They speak-sing in a meter which has not been heard in the play until that moment (trochaic tetrameter). Finally, they have found their own way out together. Their voices and bodies are in sync, and they are *moving on*.

Heracles' epiphany cuts this movement short, musically, spatially, and morally. He commands Neoptolemus and Philoctetes to go to Troy, and he does so in anapests — a much more common meter in ancient drama than the trochaic, often in use when characters enter or exit. Heracles steers the two heroes back to Troy and to the military campaign still raging there, his voice pulling back into the confines of "standard" tragic movement. This divinized hero will not stand for the vocal solution

that the two men have found. When Philoctetes responds to this command, accepting Heracles' injunction, he reacts in anapests, too. On the one hand, Philoctetes' anapests make it sonically clear that he is adopting Heracles' course of action. At the same time, they resound with the fact that Heracles imposed a rhythmic and ethical deviation from the choice Philoctetes made moments before. It is a musically astounding *I see what you did there*. I hear you, Philoctetes says, I hear you not hearing me. It is up to Philoctetes to make the only move that will truly get the men off the island. The empathy of others will not do it. It is up to him to echo. There is something profoundly empathic and utterly devastating about Philoctetes' acquiescence to Heracles.

Heracles' vocal apparition doesn't efface the problem of sounding empathy (though it seems to lay the onus for responding empathically on Philoctetes). Sublimity, descent from Zeus, omnipotent virility — Heracles' entire sensational allure — do not explain away the difficulty with Philoctetes' change of mind, though they might make it more palatable. Tempting as it may be, it cannot solve the practical deadlock. The deadlock remains, and it is essentially this: Philoctetes socially belongs to a group that did not afford him basic human dignity. Even when Neoptolemus relents and agrees to save him, it is in exasperation ("if you want to keep living like this," p. 61). Neoptolemus, the young warrior, cannot come to terms with Philoctetes' choice as a position of ethical *and* bodily integrity.

If Philoctetes' integrity also comprises an idealization of military heroism, this ideal is cast as an unreality, due to the drama's focus on Philoctetes' body. We see him as a warrior who can no longer fight. He also no longer wishes to fight, not because he has come to devalue military glory, but because he refuses to win honor through his pursuits on the battlefield alongside particular people. Philoctetes is not some kind of pre-modern pacifist. Yet the ending condemns him to a military existence which he begs to shed. Sending Philoctetes back instead of out — back to the battlefield, back to "health" — is, the way I see it, a frustrating, violent ending.

In removing Heracles from the final scene, I opted to let the chorus be the ones that sentence Philoctetes to his identity as a warrior. This identity, for all its promise of glorious individuality, cannot be extracted from the community, in this case a clearly non-empathic group that was and still is deaf to his needs. The collective's militarism has warped their moral priorities, but Philoctetes is stuck with these people, doomed to rejoin their war-thirstiness. To give this collective the last word was, arguably, my clearest ethical decision in interpreting the play. This choice spotlights the power a group bent on war has. It shows the ugly reality of their force *qua* violence: violence directed even at the "heroes" and the "winners," self-directed violence.

In those pre-COVID times, the violence of war was on my mind. If I were adapting Philoctetes at a different moment, I would no doubt have made different choices. Maybe I would lean into Odysseus as a misogynistic politician. But at that present time, I had to wade through the swamp of pain and empathy, through the sticky problem of militarism — the recognition that the pursuit of heroism can turn on itself, making monsters out of victors. I had to make my way through all that was close to home.

And then the pandemic retraced the limits of our collective empathy, suggesting for a while that some things are worse than man-made violence.

In a conversation with my boys about vaccines, they open their eyes wide when I tell them some people don't believe in science. Times used to be simpler, I think to myself sardonically, when war was the only thing that we parents needed to lie about in order to soothe our children, especially those precociously anxious about the end of the world. There are no active volcanoes in Germany (I think?). This heatwave will pass (um, that's partially true).

Now: reports of a new virus variant. A sense of history repeating itself. I am rereading this essay, and cannot tell when I will stop writing it. Rereading what I wrote of the early days of the

pandemic, sensing that familiar panic seep back in. I am writing as if these words are a dream about a pandemic I am trapped in.

Now: war in Europe.

Now, yet again now: war in Israel–Palestine. Horror. The kids are older now. Don't let them read the news.

How do you parent when you think humanity is fucked?

The end of *Philoctetes*: my philologist self may have bristled at how I hacked out an entire beautiful scene from Sophocles' Greek and rewrote it to seem more "relevant." But as a mother and a mourner, it was the least I could do. In hindsight, reinterpreting Heracles as the destructive militaristic force of an imperialistic society seems pretty straightforward. An act of a parent who once knew how to guide her children through the world.

3. Don't You See? This Is *IT*

I remember the drink dispenser. The older teenagers drank coffee too, but mostly it dispensed hot chocolate. I had never seen anything like it before, in those days of the early 1990s, a mechanism that was a little too complicated for my indecisive self, especially given the scorching temperatures of the end product: insert coins, press on the drink of choice, quickly press on any desired additions (even more sugar?) before it's too late, and already a dark-brown ribbed plastic cup that no doubt leaked toxins into the steaming beverage was waiting for you to reach out and cautiously bring to your lips. Look out for spills, look out for burns.

There was an allure to that room, to that machine, something at once revolting and mystifying, just like the acid-green fizzy liquid it produced — as overly fizzy as it was overly sweet — one of only two cold soft drink options, the other a deep fake-raspberry fuchsia. Dancers precariously leaned out of the fifth-story window, dangling their long necks outward to exhale verboten cigarette fumes. There was a perpetual smell of cocoa powder combined with cigarette smoke in that room. Was there also a sink or chairs in this awkward space? The adjacent locker-room had two rows of clothes-hangers on either wall, and was strewn

with tights, hair bands, sweatpants, backpacks, ballet shoes, and deodorant spray-cans. Two gigantic hampers for lost-and-found items, from which some — it was a measure of their preternatural cool-ness — casually fished out somebody *else's* forgotten leotard, sniffed, and wore to class as if it was the most natural thing in the world. The locker room was always full of stuff. But I cannot recall anything in that other, bare room, except for the drink dispenser and a window, which is perhaps not even an allegory for what we were expected to subsist on.

Cigarettes and cocoa. The peculiar combination of their odors is still the smell I associate with the studio's top floor. An olfactory memory that delivers the gut punch: that place you will never come back to, that moment when you did not realize how very young you were.

* * *

Wait a while. Listen. Write about it.

And so I did. I wrote, in hindsight, about starting from Philoctetes. I wrote about my sister.

Because if my bodily connection to *Oedipus* was dramaturgical or choreographic, so to speak — a connection that you can more safely bring up at a dissertation defense (the threat of tears is lower) — then Philoctetes' insistence on empathy in the face of its impossibility was something I felt I could relate to far more deeply. That incommunicability of suffering, that frustration to both sides of the attempted communication, resonated personally. It reminded me of a moment that could encapsulate the crisis of empathy in the face of pain, though it does not draw on physical pain per se. When my sister was undergoing chemotherapy — an experience that, even in its not-strictly-painful effects, centers the totality and alienating quality of the suffering body — she once tried to describe to me one of the side effects of the treatment. She said: "I feel cold on the inside. I open my mouth, and cold comes out." The look on my face apparently

betrayed my perplexity (probably also horror, I regret forever) rather than whatever empathic recognition I should have mustered for such a statement, since my sister asked, “do you get what I mean?” and quickly answered her own question: “no, you don’t.”

Papai, we have heard this sound before.

Papai, remind me how it went. It went gaaguah. You were singing.

Were there other moments where I didn’t get my sister’s pain? Probably about eleven hundred million. Did she ever think she doesn’t get mine, and regret it? I don’t know.

She arrived at that limit of what the body can do to you: make you absolutely certain that no one else will ever understand.

What was our *papai*? Did we have one? Would everything have been different if we had?

Whatever failure I failed her, whatever inevitable failure of communication, failure of listening, failure of words stood up between us like a tower of phenomenological truths, like shards of soft glass, like a wave that asserts its unshakable wisdom by crumbling into sand, I cannot make up for it. Except, perhaps, by noticing. By letting the wave swell and wash over me.

* * *

I tell my sons that I will be going away for a few days for a conference. My youngest’s first reaction is to ask that I do not take with me the dark-blue square shawl with the large flower print. While I am away he sleeps with the shawl neatly folded into a small pillow under his head. That magical metonymy of objects.

His older brother will ask me to leave behind a shawl for him too, but really, he satisfies momentary bouts of longing by deeply inhaling one of my sweaters. He is the more impulsive,

less methodical of the two. Making plans overwhelms him with possible eventualities. He would rather just be in the present.

I hope his hands and face are clean when he touches my woolen things. It is a horrible thought, I know. But I am irrationally worried about moth holes, constantly trying to avoid them. Sticky fingers are unsafe, they leave too many traces. Wool sweaters as latter-day corsets: we may not eat or move too briskly or love while we wear them. Our vitality will spoil them with imperfections. The moths will come to guzzle the fat and salt we leave behind, disfiguring our softest, most precious items. Wool is not worth the heartache.

Why am I still mourning *stuff*?

My corsets, washable skins I have shed. Ballet leotards soaked with sweat: underarm sweat, underboob sweat, sweat tracing the shape of my navel; if there are white stains on the leotard you can't wear it again to class unless you start the pliés with an extra layer on, and by the time you peel that one off, you have soaked the leotard again and the white doesn't show.

I have grown out of every single one of my leotards. Not much taller, but at any rate, my child-bearing pelvis is wider. I avoid clothes that tight these days, and besides, I had completely worn them out and was no longer using them. Still, I regret not having kept any. Though the elastic would have broken by now, the fabric discolored and the side seam torn, I wish I still had at least one of them. I wish it was saved somewhere in a drawer in my parents' house, so I could visit it maybe a few times a decade, hold it, breathe in the stench of ancient elastane.

* * *

I am on the no. 7 pink metro line in Paris. I am an adult, but a very young one. I am riding home, which is to say the studio apartment I have rented for the year. I have lived here for a few months, and have made a rule for myself, never to eat while

riding the metro. If I picked up a pain aux raisins on the way back from class or from my gig teaching Hebrew to a group of French-Jewish adults, I promised myself not to waste the experience of savoring it, no matter how hungry I am, by consuming it underground. Fresh air and sunlight for my pastries, please. Yet I love the metro, with its ease of use and its dependability (even its disgusting smells are predictable). That hoards of people are carried around the city in this dirty, noisy, amazingly efficient transportation network still gets me giddy, realizing each day that I am part of a real-life but movie-set-ready bustling metropolis. I remember the thrill of racing down the stairs to the platform and jumping onto the wagon while the signal for the closing doors is still honking its cautionary chord. It is a milestone in understanding how the world works, and I am proud of myself: for correctly gauging how many seconds I have to get on the train, for being quick and easy and only barely out of breath, for making use of the system.

I had not, however, mastered the Art of Never Making Eye Contact on Public Transportation (one of the few things, I now realize, the Parisians and the Saxons have in common). I was inappropriately curious, awed by the heterogeneity of humans around me, taking them in: how that woman's scarf is tied, how this old Asian couple are sitting in silence with baskets full of produce on the floor between their legs, how that guy seems to have matched his socks to his eyeglasses. I am looking at people, and if they were not so versed in the Art, they would register this as an intrusion. Shared spaces here operate so differently than in Israel, where simply being in public is a *carte blanche* for others to stare at, talk with, and give their opinion about you. But in the Parisian metro, I can gawk silently, secure in the privacy that others allow me by putting up their own invisible walls. Until one day on the no. 7, when a young man looks back at me.

A stranger on the metro has made eye contact with me, for more than a split second. I am standing by the doors, ready to get off at the next station, and he is standing close by. I am not, for some unfathomable reason, scared by the way he casually breaks the unwritten law of privacy in public spaces and una-

bashedly looks into my face. And then he says to me: *Vous êtes mignonne*. This means something like *you are cute*, except there is an untranslatable mixture of linguistic registers here, because *vous* implies distance, and *mignonne* implies intimacy. For all intents and purposes, this is a pick-up line. But I do not really know enough French to get the nuances, or rather the bluntness, of this statement. I shyly answer *Merci*, acknowledging the compliment with a blush. A man I do not know is looking at me and commenting on how cute I look. And I am so young, I am not even afraid or angry or exasperated.

I should have looked away, I still tell myself twenty years later. I shouldn't have let this happen.

Everything was fine. I was not unsafe. Nothing other than what I wrote here occurred. But I still want to undo it entirely, to reach back in time and flick my gaze away from his face before he had a chance to speak to me. Or to plant an anachronistic smartphone in my hand to text my sister *omg you wouldn't believe what just happened...* And then she could text back *what a douchebag* or *haha has that line ever worked for him?* or alternatively *and did you say vous aussi?* ;)

Something about that brief encounter with this guy on the metro has stayed with me all these years, floating above the threshold of my conscious memories and then back beneath it, occupying an incomprehensibly outsized role in my mythology of self. Perhaps because it captures so well the late bloomer that I was, a young woman in a state of utter naivety well beyond what could have been assumed by appearances. But it is not just that I missed that I was being hit on rather aggressively. More fundamentally, I did not understand the power dynamics: that if you are curious or keen or outgoing, a man might decide to encroach on that, just because he feels like it. A man can encroach on your mere existence even if you are none of these things. Sure, I had had the talk with my mother when I was ten years old, when I started taking the bus by myself to ballet class. Always sit in the aisle seat. If a man touches you, get up and move. But that was about disgusting old creepy dudes, surely, not about the young

and handsome, right? My mother's advice was about something as incontrovertible as touch, before I learned that even a seemingly irrefutable tactile intrusion has the power to gaslight you, immediately and wordlessly eroding your trust in your own sensations. I must have imagined this. I don't want to hurt his feelings. I shouldn't make a scene. No big deal. I'll just inch a tiny bit away. I'm still seated, see, everything's fine. Just two more stops and I'm off.

I did not realize that I was leaving myself open, allowing myself to be vulnerable in a situation where I should have kept my shield up. I was not scared then, yet. A few years later — when a tenured professor more than twice my age, whom I looked up to as a mentor, declared he was in love with me (and expected me to reciprocate) — at *that* moment, I was appropriately terrified.

How do I inch away from this? How do I survive till the end of the semester? Where's the next station I can get off at?

I should have looked away. I shouldn't have let this happen. Shit shit shit shit. Why why why why how did this why did I what do I do now fuck shit shit.

Scrambling to get a shield on now shit shit shit it's too late shit.

At least as far as the *mignonne* incident goes, I can also tell myself I was unfamiliar with the language; I was stupid in the ways of the world, on a metro car headed south-east to the thirteenth quarter one afternoon, and I was entirely alone in Paris. Remember how you tried to explain, dad? I think this is what it means.

Maybe I still hold on to that moment because the scenario was so easy to fix: just reach back and flick my gaze away. There was no betrayal of trust, in that early case, no abuse of power. But if I trace a line from that metro car to the office of that professor, a vector of loneliness suggests itself. It is one of the vectors on which my life progressed in my early twenties, and it ran

parallel to the message that following my passion and feeling secure could not reside in the same place. A message first inadvertently communicated by a stranger, and then whispered, like a shattering scream, by a man I admired: You are not safe here, doing what you love. You are not at home.

* * *

Avascular necrosis (AVN) is cellular death of bone components due to interruption of the blood supply, most commonly as a result of local trauma, drug side effects, or disease. AVN ultimately leads to collapse of the bone structure and destruction of the adjacent joint, causing pain, loss of joint function, and long-term joint damage. The hip is the most common joint affected by AVN.

The top of the femur: the ball to the pelvis's socket.

* * *

I open my mouth, and cold comes out. Do you get what I mean? No, you don't.

I cannot remember when I first wrote down this one-sided dialogue. I do remember which notebook it was and where the lines were on the page. But I have since translated the words from Hebrew into English and transferred them onto a digital medium, from one file to another. Location on the page is now meaningless. I rush to the shelf to try to find the first record, that particular piece of paper, make sure it is, in fact, as I remembered. Recalling the act of remembering, I am now not just worried that I do not quite remember this thing, but that I have misremembered the way I tried to remember it.

I can't find the notebook.

I don't even want to cry, I just feel the dryness of my tongue: such is the sense of emptiness at the failure to retrace this moment. Let me instead be led by Mnemosyne, with A.E. Stallings. Take me through "the valley on the moon / Where everything misplaced on earth accrues, / And here all things are gathered that you lose." Bring me to where I might find "the letters

We meant to write and didn't — all the unsaid
 Begrudged congratulations to our betters,
 Condolences we owed the lately dead,
 Love notes unsent — in love, we all are debtors —³

Writing, or dreaming: these are the ways I get to talk to my sister nowadays. The first time I had to communicate with her via writing, I resisted. I read a letter aloud at her funeral. I spoke of deadlines. You were always better at it than me, I told her, you got your stuff done on time. (She had finished her dissertation quite literally on her deathbed.) I meant to read you this letter before you died, I said, but I didn't make it.

I wanted her to know what I was going to say at her funeral. It made sense at the time.

You, my responsible older sister, still a child yourself, you used to pick me up from preschool. We would walk home, then sit at the entrance to our building and empty the sand out of our sandals before going upstairs.

As you were being buried, I recounted this memory out loud. I now remember speaking it on that occasion more than the sound of the sand falling out of our shoes and hitting the ground, the coolness of the shaded ground-floor entrance, my feeling of childish trust in the everyday, calm at the uncomplicated-ness of being with you. Should I regret sharing that memory publicly? Writing it, speaking it out loud? Writing it again?

3 A.E. Stallings, "Lost and Found," in *Like: Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 61, 66.

In *Bluets*, Maggie Nelson writes: “writing does do something to one’s memory— [...] at times it can have the effect of an album of childhood photographs, in which each image replaces the memory it aimed to preserve. [...] Does an album of written thoughts perform a similar displacement, or replacement, of the ‘original’ thoughts themselves?”⁴

I could not have said farewell while you were still here. It could not have been written in advance. But every time I missed a deadline, every time a letter of condolences or apology or love remained unwritten in my mind until the period of its appropriate sending expires, it was an echo of THE deadline. Writing to you used to be the only thing that was urgent, that could give form to the urgency, that could organize and justify both the writing and the procrastinating.

Stallings’s poem offers permission to mourn what had not been written, to let go a little of the self-loathing that coats every thought about writing and not-writing. What is lost still remains somewhere. The memory, and [breathe in]
 whatever is left after its displacement... [breathe out]
 ... ’u
 its echo. ah

* * *

Sophocles’ plays are all populated by figures who ask others to “get” their pain, and these others fail to offer the recognition, or its precise amount, kind, and shade, for which the suffering protagonist is hoping. Hello again, Electra, you of the fucked up siblinghood. Please approach.

The chapter on Electra was the first one I completed. In a dissertation-writing workshop with my peers, led by a faculty member, I recall speaking of my difficulty to get the chapter done. I linked it to a sense of not liking Electra, but also somehow identifying with her. The professor jokingly asked if I hated

⁴ Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), 77–78.

my mother. No, that wasn't it... But, I wanted to tell her, like Electra I am caught up in grief that will not let go. At the same time, like her siblings I know what it's like to stand in front of the closest person to you in the world and not fathom how they experience their pain, not understand the choices they make to manage it. In an unbelievable fluke of cosmic indifference, my brother was very ill then, and for a few very bad months, the possibility of us losing him as well was real. That same winter, I had a severe rash all over my face and upper body. It was not my first winter in the North American Midwest, with sub-freezing temperatures and heating systems that parch your skin; I had not recently changed soap or laundry detergent or used a new hair product. No apparent external reason for this rash. I went from doctor to doctor, specialist to specialist, in an effort to get a diagnosis, a plausible cause for this allergic eruption. There was none to be had; the verdict was: stress.

In my personal history, Electra is linked to that winter where I wore an inexplicably reddened and puffy face. Electra is written in my body's memory as anxiety, not just over the possibility of losing my one remaining sibling, but that we two would also be doomed to repeat the misunderstanding and absence of empathy that comes with such life-threatening pain. Empathy's impossibility, despite love and care and sorrow, despite our shared DNA. The skin on my face screamed against this potential fate, yearning for that unattainable place where *let him be* (it is his pain) is also *be with him*.

4. There Is No Painless Answer Here

Lately I noticed, and it was a sudden realization, that the back of my hand looks like my mother's.

My mother's hands are bigger than mine — one of the reasons I always feel childlike beside her — but now I can say, mine are like hers. She has had, for as long as I can remember, prominent blue veins, life-giving rivers curving down from knuckles to wrist. Their color actually appears greenish through the skin. But it is not just their hue that made them remarkable to my child eyes. Their paths were easily traceable with my small finger. They puff out from what is purportedly the surface, a dimensionality that always seemed mysteriously beautiful to me, a sign of strength and know-how, a magical, fingerprint-like uniqueness.

The memory of her hand — it is not a memory because the hand still is, my mother still is; it is like thinking of the eye color of a loved one, also not a recollection but an act of cognitive retrieval; fact, not fabrication — the feeling of her hand, the memory of noticing and internalizing that *this is my mother's hand*, is located in the house where we lived when I was

around my younger son's current age. We were in California; we returned to Israel after two years, and then I got sick.

That temporary home, that space of childhood before heartache—no, before heartache imbued everything else—is the object of ultimate longing, geographically and mentally far enough to be irretrievable, and also the space that engraved in me the deepest sense of comfort and familiarity.

Gaaguah.

Looking at my hand, my mother's hand which is now my own, I feel something I have never felt in relation to my own aging: relief.

Maybe I will be able to live anywhere. Maybe I will be able to feel at home in my own body. Maybe there will come a time when I simply live, not live after. Maybe it has come.

* * *

I leave my boys the shawls, and get on a train with Nelson's *Blues*.

While I am away, I steal one afternoon to myself, and visit a Georgia O'Keeffe exhibit. I pause between two pelvis paintings, hanging across from each other. White bone on sky-blue background, blue like the invention of the world, biblical, naive, pregnant, unreal. One of these paintings is a closeup, the hole in the middle of the pelvis filling up most of the canvas, the white bone framing the blue beyond. The old bones do not seem brittle or fragile or wasting away; they are pristine and perfect and permanent. They make you believe for a second that bones are eternal. They make you forget (but, of course, also remind you) that detached from body they signify the slow disintegration of something. That they were once alive, hidden beyond flesh, marking the limit of how deep you can go. That you are looking through something that is, should be, must remain, completely opaque.

The effect of bone as something that you can see through — of a nothing materializing where the end of pain should be, a hole instead of what you can incontrovertibly hold on to — is arresting.

I read the rest of *Bluets* with gripping anticipation that Georgia O’Keeffe’s blue will also make an appearance in Nelson’s catalog, and then irrational disappointment as it becomes clear that it will not.

* * *

When I was 16 years old, my autoimmune disease flared up. Dancing had always been a way of defying my disease and normalizing the body, feeling it was strong and capable, but up to that point, the price was not particularly high. My condition had been mild, I felt healthy and certainly passed as such. Thanks to the same medical condition, I was also very thin. In fact, I had to consciously make sure I never lost weight. This shielded me from the gaping maws of an eating disorder, all colors of which barked at us young dancers from wall-to-wall mirrors. My sister was not so lucky.

My flare-up was manageable. I vaguely remember it happened over summer break, so that I was back at the studio in the fall. But the desire to push against the body’s now more explicitly set limitations became, if not more conscious, then more needy.

There was a special satisfaction in registering the body’s strength in its exhaustion as I woke up in the morning and felt, before anything else, the ache in my muscles and my stiff joints, the effects of yesterday’s dance classes. It could have also been with a sense of gratitude — if I had not still, in essence, taken my abled teenage body for granted. Yet the worry that the effort might be too much, enough to make me fall sick, was a crouching beast about to pounce, an abyss in the background of my everyday, shimmering beyond the daily meal-planning,

that constant killjoy exercise in control and foresight and bag-packing.

The walk from the bus stop both ways — to the studio, and back home — was just a little too long. The backpack felt heavy on my slim shoulders, full of sandwiches and carb-heavy snacks, along with my textbooks in Physics and French. Was the anxiety folded neatly into one inner pocket? The other girls, who spent their mornings at performing-arts high schools near and far, subsisted on bell peppers and chewing gum. I, finishing my geometry homework at 11 pm, fishing out the last hairpin from the warm center of my inevitably messy bun (it didn't matter how many pins I used), would never be a dancer.

Today, anxiety is strewn all over the inside of my handbags, laced in the marks a blunt pencil tip left there and the stains of spilled sunscreen lotion, clinging to the sticky patches from some half-eaten candy. A child, as possessive as he is sugar-sated, asked me to save it for later.

There was one teacher I particularly liked. She often wore a Laban Centre black-and-white t-shirt, had a mane of unruly curls, and was kind. She taught a Limón-based modern dance class on Monday evenings, starting at 7:45. (I would eat an early dinner at home beforehand and pack a small snack to eat straight afterwards, in the car ride back; my father would pick me up from these late sessions.) When my left foot started hurting — first a *hm*, then a *huh?*, then an *ennnhhhrrrrrr* — I showed it to her. The area where the toes connect to the rest of the foot was slightly swollen and red. I explained the kind of pain I was feeling. My teacher was not sure what it was. Put some ice on it, she advised.

Walking hurt. Doing a relevé definitely hurt. Relevé is the basis for everything. Ballet, and most modern dance, happens in the transition between having a foot fully on the floor and being partially or wholly in the air. Yes, there is quite a lot of floor-

work in a Limón class — but still, you have to be able to leave the ground.

Dancing, any form of dancing on my feet, hurt.

I had arrived: I was injured! Suffering was part of the point, and being injured was like getting a medal, at least for effort. No matter that this was not like anyone else's injury, nothing like what dancers normally had: inflamed ligaments, a torn meniscus. Ugh, why did my injury have to be weird?

The icing and the hoping it would go away did not work. Walking hurt.

As it turned out, the short-term medication I received for my flare-up and my intensive dance regime combined into something called avascular necrosis: bone-death owing to loss of blood supply (I didn't even know bones are connected to the blood system). This happened in the middle metatarsal of my left foot, and the damage to the joint was irrevocable. Treatment consisted only of making sure it did not get worse. For around a month, I wore an uncomfortable orthopedic slipper specially fitted with a reverse-incline sole, so that my toes were higher than my heel and as little weight as possible was put on the affected joint.

I also had to stop dancing.

Did the doctor say I would be able to get back to dancing eventually? Strangely, I cannot recall. It was, after all, the same specialist who had determined, around a decade prior, that my turnout was at the deficient end of the scale. I cannot say if he had this information from my ballet school admission file in front of him when treating my newly dead bone. But the conversation probably made clear that my professional aspirations as a dancer were nonexistent. (It would have sufficed if he asked me which high school I attended; I was, for all intents and purposes, academically oriented.) I was at the age when dancers naturally divided to those who go on with it as a career and those who do

not, who pick another field, leave the ballerina fantasy behind, and get on with their lives.

This injury, its irreversibility, was the definitive end to it, one way or the other. I will never be a dancer, it was settled now. I can't even do a relevé.

I stopped for a few years. I tried again at university, adult classes for non-professionals. There was one evening class I especially liked, with plenty of floor-work. The teacher, a short, very strong woman with a raspy voice, was probably my age (then). I am trying to recall the walk home from that studio in Nachlaot to the first apartment my now-husband and I shared in Talbiyeh. It takes me a while. Sections of Jerusalem, even neighboring ones, remain mentally disconnected for me. I struggle to draw a smooth path between them.

* * *

I am putting off finishing this book. I fill up my days with administrative tasks and doing the dishes.

And then I dream of Hannah. Hannah, the dance studio office manager. I think she was Hungarian. Freckled all over, she was a bright-orange redhead, but not the translucent kind. She was strong and thick and weathered, with dark eyes and a heavy-smoker voice. A woman who had no reason to be unkind or disappointed in me.

In the dream, I have her on the phone, and she is trying to give me some doctor's contact information. The ballet teachers recommend him, they want him to make sure I am in good shape to dance, since they know I am sick. I cannot make out what Hannah is saying, I hear only every other syllable of his name and phone number. I try to write it down, but it is like I am speaking to her through a tunnel of wind. I feel embarrassed asking her to repeat herself again and again.

My dream does not allow this wished-for gesture of concern on the part of those in charge of my physical-artistic education — a gesture so different from how things actually went — to

take coherent, auditory shape. Care remains unheard. Leaning in to hear Hannah's voice, I become an archeologist of my past, and of my own previous dreams about dancing. I am digging up fragmented, faded images, making up the story they purportedly tell. Dreams accrue meaning spirally: once a dream element is deciphered as referring to some thing or person, a subsequent dream happening at the same place or about the same thing or person refers not just to them but also to the dream about them that came before. A dream about the dance studio points to my writing about dreaming about dancing. It sends me back to a place that feels familiar, to the comfort of syntactical understanding, only to find I no longer speak the language. I am reaching—*knee out! Up, up, up!*—straining to make sense of something whose sound remains inaudible.

* * *

There is a strange intergenerational parallelogram that delineates itself in the space between my children and my siblings (and I ask myself whether, or to what extent, this connective space makes itself felt for other parents as well, people who became parents without having lost a sibling). A sense of wonder at the way my eldest is similar to my sister, not just as beautiful as her but beautiful *like* her. The recognition that I am raising a human whose DNA holds blueprints for earlier versions of The Akavias, whose smile twinkles with other people's success and heartache and laughter and missed opportunity. An unbearable realization in my bones, that my mother has lost a child. And from there comes an uncanny positioning of myself as my mother, or as mother to my sister.

Perhaps it is just living to become older than my older sister.

The last time I dreamt of her was the night before my son went on his first ever overnight school trip. In the dream, I am at my late grandmother's house with my mother and my sister. The smell of my grandmother's cooking wafts through my sleeping mind with a realism only the olfactory cortex could produce.

Everything else in the scene is quite fantastic: we had never, as far as I can recall, been together in that house just the four of us women. Then there is some guy who wants to take my sister on a trip to outer space. She refuses the offer in blunt German. I am bummed about the lost date-opportunity; it seems like fun to my dream-self. Nobody gets to enjoy a meal in this dream, yet we are all somehow physically tethered to the dining table. We are a family, literally grounded, grumbling in our unquestionable togetherness, and there is some comfort in that. Yet joy is actively denied in this over-the-top “if only” scenario that my subconscious has cooked up.

If only you had gone on that date, if only your life had had a different trajectory, if only you had gotten on a rocket off this stupid, cancer-inducing world, if only you had said *yes, fuck it*.

My sister coming to me in a dream has also become a leitmotif about dreams, about paying attention to them. It marks itself as important by conjuring all those previous moments when I woke up breathless and tearful from another rare vision of her, trying to fall back into that sleep to extend her visit for a little while longer, hug her for a few more seconds. And then I walk with that feeling for an entire day or week:

I was with my sister.

What was she trying to say to me?

Oh, my firstborn son, I want to stretch out that parallelogram until it is a two-dimensional line that does not bound you to any shape, and bend space until this line has no fixed direction. Go, go, go on your Klassenfahrt! Break free of my grief.

* * *

Philoctetes' wound is in his foot. It was only when I worked to put the play onstage that I realized this much more immediate, physical point of connection for me to the character, independent of other forms of distress. Independent of ill siblings.

I opened every rehearsal with some meditative instructions, asking my actors to focus on their feet: Philoctetes cannot walk on both feet, but you, all of you, whether you are playing an abled or disabled character, please feel the weight of your body on your feet. Thank your feet for carrying you, all day every day. Focus on your beautiful, healthy, functional, trustworthy feet... until my actors were making fun of me, trying to add continuously more adjectives to this string of feet-praise, reminding me if I forgot one of my regulars.

Philoctetes has been for so long a thing of the body for me. Writing about him, writing about writing about him, has become a recursive exercise, an essay about — an actual attempt to — return. Philoctetes invites this recursiveness. He calls us to return home, even while suggesting that this return is impossible. He calls for a revisiting, like grief.

For a year after my sister died, I wore her burgundy-leather boots, even though they were a size too big. Beautiful, supple greaves, they brightened up my outfits but weighed heavy on my legs. Carrying this extra load of armor was especially hard on my left foot. Still, I think I was lucky that grief allowed me, then, a certain childish loss of self-reflexivity, an involuntary devotion to stuff.

A physiotherapist once told me that I have a low pain threshold, but a high pain tolerance. Sometimes I think Philoctetes and I have this in common.

