

FIGURE 1. Philoctetes on Lemnos. Painting on aryballos (oil flask). Fourth century B.C. From L. A. Milani, *Il mito di Filottete*, 1879

Get Jung's
Symbols of Transition
and
Workearth. Same to
this.

Oscar Mandel

PHILOCTETES AND THE FALL OF TROY

Plays, Documents, Iconography, Interpretations

Including Versions by Sophocles, André Gide,
Oscar Mandel, and Heiner Müller

ΤΟΜΕΑΣ ΚΛΑΣΙΚΩΝ ΣΠΟΥΔΩΝ

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take the bow and the arrows and carry them to the boat.

[NEOPTOLEMUS approaches PHILOCTETES in grief, falls to his knees, kisses his forehead]

I order you to do it. Isn't it enough to have betrayed me? Do you wish to betray your country as well? Look how he has devoted himself to his country.

[NEOPTOLEMUS obediently takes the bow and arrows; exit]

And now farewell, harsh Philoctetes. Did you despise me very much? Ah, I should like to know. . . I should like him to know. I think he is admirable—and that—thanks to him, we shall win.

NEOPTOLEMUS [calling from a distance]. Ulysses! ULYSSES. I'm coming. [Exit]

Act 5

PHILOCTETES is alone, on a rock. *The sun is rising in a perfectly clear sky. Over the sea, in the distance, a boat is moving away.* PHILOCTETES looks at it, long

[PHILOCTETES [murmuring, very calmly]. They will never come back; they have no more bows to seek. . . I am happy.

[His voice has become extraordinarily mild and beautiful; around him flowers are showing through the snow, and birds from heaven come down to feed him]

Oscar Mandel

THE SUMMONING OF
PHILOCTETES
A Tragedy
(1961)

Handwritten notes in the right margin, including "Act 5", "Philoctetes", and "Ulysses".

The Summoning of Philoctetes appeared in a first version under the title Island in the Winter 1961 issue of the Massachusetts Review. Dramatic readings were given in the same year at Amherst and Smith colleges. In 1962 a group of actors, including Harold Innocent, Barry Atwater, and Harold Gould staged a concert reading in the studios of radio station KPFFK in Los Angeles. This was subsequently broadcast, and frequently rebroadcast, by that station and its affiliates in San Francisco (KPFA) and New York (WBAI). Similar concert readings by the same group were given in 1962 at Los Angeles City College and the California Institute of Technology. A revised version of the play appeared in the first volume of my Collected Plays (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Unicorn Press, 1970). It is still further revised under its present title.

Isolation from mankind, celebrated by Gide, becomes problematic in The Summoning of Philoctetes. Heracles provides the original postulate, to wit, that social man is man at war with man: homo homini lupus. The play proceeds to illustrate his point through two acts of atrocity. On the other hand, the blessings of civilization are given their due as well. The mesh of good and evil becomes inextricable. And the central exhibit is the unclarifiable ambiguity of the man Odysseus: the great civilizer, but also, and inevitably, the ruthless blood-letter.

Philoctetes and Demodocus are both brought face to face with this ambiguity in the man, which is also the ambiguity of the state. Shall a man be pure? He can be so only in perfect solitude. Does a man want human companionship? He must accept the pollution that goes with it.

Demodocus has the last word on this dilemma, but if I read the text correctly, the last word in this case is not necessarily the best word. Even though the state—through Odysseus—is painted in a far darker light than what we find in Sophocles, we are no longer so sure that the values embodied by the Ithacan leader should be, or can be, subordinated to some higher value. The play ends upon a doubt.

The solitude which Demodocus chooses in the end should not be confused with the solitude of Philoctetes in the beginning. Philoctetes

U.S. Philo;
Thoreauvian
view of
society

has Medon. Here is dialogue, not soliloquy. Philoctetes lives and operates in a family way, somewhat like people today who take their kith and kin to live in the wilderness. It must be added, as an aside for our times, that sexual considerations are grossly impertinent in this context. The point is that we see Philoctetes from the start as—unbeknownst to himself—a sanguine and companionable soul. No wonder that when he is shown perfect solitude—as Galileo was shown the instruments—he breaks, and discovers that, like most human beings, he is willing to pay the price for human warmth.

The structure of the play is a chiasm—an X crossing, since Demodocus takes the place on Lemnos left empty by the older man. I have said already that the two solitudes are by no means the same. Now it must be added that the choice of authentic solitude is made by Demodocus the man, not Demodocus the poet. The play does not suggest, I think, that art, unlike engineering, is a solitary activity. Bereft of Medon, Philoctetes would undoubtedly have ceased to work and experiment. (That is perhaps why the pictorial tradition represents him, in his absolute solitude, as barely surviving and doing nothing else). But will Demodocus compose lyrics on Lemnos? By no means. The text tells us unequivocally that he will fall silent. The imperative voice for Demodocus has been that of ethics, not aesthetics.

While both science and art are seen as communal enterprises, it is clear that the community gives them quite distinct estimates. The play indicates that society welcomes the poet, and will miss him if he vanishes. But it requires the scientist/technologist. There will be no oracle in Agamemnon's army warning that without Demodocus the war will be lost, or Greek society will go to pieces. But Philoctetes must be harnessed. At worst, his services must be denied to the enemy. It turns out, therefore, that the choice between companionship and solitude was one which Philoctetes, all too useful to the state, would never have been allowed to make. As soon as the oracle sniffed out the existence, somewhere, of an ultimate weapon, the cleverest of the generals was sent to buy it, steal it—or neutralize it.

Philo
part from
separatist
(very U.S.)

et Philoctetes
warmth

people's
art,
but (of
Franklin)
not printed
idea

Cold War
(the language)

CHARACTERS

HERACLES
ODYSSEUS
PHILOCTETES
DEMODOCUS
MEDON

CHORUS of ten soldiers

The action takes place before the cave of PHILOCTETES on the island of Lemnos

PROLOGUE *with drum*

HERACLES. Philoctetes! My voice fills this island, you do not hear it, yet soon you shall. Heracles returns to earth: your master and companion when I too knew the warm and cold of life; but now become among the Gods another God, and still your master. And my word as God remains my word when I was man: War!

Philoctetes! Let it fall away that Odysseus banished you long ago to Lemnos ringed by the sea: a warrior, lord of seven ships, but useless to the Greeks, your foot swollen with the serpent's venom, a coarse stench polluting the holy sacrifice, and your cries unbearable to the soldiers. Let it fall away, for your banishment must end. Troy stands unbowed. Its princes strut upon the unbroken battlements, and shall not perish until pierced by the strong strange arrows you fashioned, Philoctetes, in the long hours we the Gods emptied for you, foreseeing it all.

Philoctetes! Unite with your brothers! On the plains of Ilium the son of Achilles, beautiful and brutal Pyrrhus, waits for you. His hand that cracks the city open. Yours the weapon in his hand. Come, come from the hunting of birds. Hunt Troy! Two heroes have landed on Lemnos, charged by the oracle to summon you. You do not hear them, but they take possession of you. They are trampling the beach, resolute. They have scaled the hill towards your cave, while elsewhere the string of your bow thuds and the wild birds, premonitory, die in the sky. You do not hear yet you shall hear the human word, the god-sent word: War!

To be is to do. To do is to fight. To fight is to be. Such is the law of Heracles, obedient to his master: Zeus the Olympian. [*He vanishes*]

1. Both here and in Scene 4 Heracles may be suggested rather than shown. Contrary devices—a strong light, or a gigantic shadow—could be equally

will triumph

Puritan:
Superb
God's/Society's
Providence
(pre-organized)

Marines

God's will
→ war
(Bussie!)

SCENE I

FIRST SOLDIER. No one is here, Odysseus. Follow me.
 ODYSSEUS. The old horrible stench. I remember it. All but unbearable.
 Soldiers, spread out and look for our man, each in a different direc-
 tion.

[The EIGHTH, NINTH, and TENTH SOLDIERS leave]

DEMODOCUS. Are we really on the spot, Odysseus?
 ODYSSEUS. On the spot or near it. The darkness of Lemnos under the
 heavy trees. The stairway of rocks and caves. The inhuman silence.
 Here, Demodocus, I myself brought the unhappy man ten years ago
 at the command of Agamemnon.

FIFTH SOLDIER. Men! Here's a cave, and the remains of a fire!

DEMODOCUS. Would this be his shelter?

ODYSSEUS. Go in, my friend. Take your sword in hand. Caution!

DEMODOCUS [within]. It is the cave, men! Furnished. Almost a house.

ODYSSEUS. What do you see?

DEMODOCUS. Strange. Two couches covered with skins—Medon is still
 alive. Wooden utensils—table, benches, a few knives—bronze basins
 and pots—

ODYSSEUS. More than we left him!

DEMODOCUS. [emerging]. Stone tools. A hearth. Sunlight penetrates
 from a high opening in the rock. But why do you hang back, Odys-
 seus with your hand on your sword? Go in yourself.

ODYSSEUS. Soldiers, keep looking about. Too many trees for comfort
 here. A man might be concealed anywhere with a bow in his hands.
 DEMODOCUS. Do you think he will be hostile to us, Odysseus? After ten
 years?

ODYSSEUS. Ten years may have made him forget, or they may have
 deepened his hatred. That is why my hand is on the sword.

DEMODOCUS. Still, capturing the bow may be easy; but taking him back
 with us—

ODYSSEUS. And voluntarily! Freely offering us his skill!

DEMODOCUS. I see great difficulties in that, Odysseus. Volunteer to join
 the atrocious miseries of the war?

FIRST SOLDIER. Don't dwell on difficulties and miseries, Demodocus; it's
 the wrong approach for a soldier. After all, if he won't come back of
 his own free will, I suppose we'll tie him up and argue with him later.

DEMODOCUS. Force him back with us, like an enemy; but I'm afraid he'll
 never reveal his secrets to us if we do.

ODYSSEUS. And yet force him back we must if he refuses to come. Have
 you considered, my friends, that the Trojans are sailing towards
 Lemnos too?

Mandel's The Summoning of Philoctetes

FIRST SOLDIER [deeply alarmed]. The Trojans? How would they know
 about his weapon?

ODYSSEUS. Why, have the Trojans no oracles of their own? Are not the
 same Gods in their sky as in ours? The danger is greater than you
 think. Perhaps they have landed already; perhaps they have made
 friends with Philoctetes, and learned from him how to make the bow.

SECOND SOLDIER. Odysseus, what are you saying?

ODYSSEUS. Calm yourselves. While we are here, the rest of our forces
 are quietly scouring the island, with instructions of their own. But I
 trust that we have landed first. And we too have our instructions. We
 must persuade Philoctetes to return with us. But what if he refuses?
 Shall we allow him to be approached by a Trojan delegation? In his
 bitterness against us he might yield to them, traitor, without so much
 as a bribe.

SEVENTH SOLDIER. What must we do, Odysseus?

ODYSSEUS. Persuade him if we can, compel him if he resists, kill him if
 we must.

THIRD SOLDIER. Kill him?

ODYSSEUS. The man has a murderous weapon in his hand or in his
 brain. Who made him contrive it? He himself compels us either to
 attach him to us, or to destroy him.

DEMODOCUS. This was kept from us till now.

ODYSSEUS. Are you ready, each one of you, to carry out Agamemnon's
 orders?

SECOND SOLDIER. If we must, Odysseus, if we must.

FIFTH SOLDIER. Who can blame us for keeping this weapon out of the
 enemy's hands?

THIRD SOLDIER. God knows we are loyal. Yet God forbid we should pour
 out the blood of a fellow Greek.

FOURTH SOLDIER. God forbid. Yet you know best what fighters we have
 been, always at your side; and how else is this endless, sorrowful war
 to end?

[Enter the EIGHTH SOLDIER]

EIGHTH SOLDIER. Odysseus, I found footprints!

ODYSSEUS. How far from here?

EIGHTH SOLDIER. About two hundred yards away; on a sandy spot; but
 leading down from the cave, not returning to it.

ODYSSEUS. One or two men?

EIGHTH SOLDIER. Two.

ODYSSEUS. Good. Medon is with him. Old or fresh?

EIGHTH SOLDIER. Fresh, Odysseus, fresh!

ODYSSEUS. Splendid! Go back, soldier, and look sharp. Give us a warn-
 ing the moment you see him. [Exit the soldier] Men, are we ready to

Cold War

So American "Not my fault!"

see next P.

Search + some op

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→

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Trojans

disappear at the snap of a finger?

FIRST SOLDIER. We are, sir.

ODYSSEUS. Now, Demodocus, the rest is yours. Here he will find you, a poor lonely shipwrecked Greek.

DEMODOCUS. I know my part, Odysseus.

ODYSSEUS. You were not chosen for this mission without good reason. Me and the other chiefs Philoctetes hates, as though we and not the serpent had bitten his ankle. But you are a lieutenant: noble in your own right, a man I have always placed near myself at my table, among my dearest companions, young as you are; though not yet in the highest authority. You are a stranger to Philoctetes. He can hate you only as a Greek, but you will easily persuade him to like you as a man. Furthermore, you are skilled with your speech. To whom else do we turn, after the fighting or during a feast, for a love ditty, or a hymn to battle, or a ballad of old heroes? Though even as a spearsman you are by no means a man whom the enemy would ignore. Your role it will be, therefore, to enchant the heart of Philoctetes with sinuous, inveigling words and strong appeals. Invoke the glory that shall come to him when Troy falls. Paint for him the suffering of the Greeks: and here you will stir in his heart the emotion of kinship, the longing for one's own which makes even their sins bearable. Speak to him of prizes and rewards, and particularly the gift of young women. Praise the balm of human companionship: what man can desire this terrible solitude? Who does not long now and then to hear the cozy gossip of a marketplace, the hubbub of a tavern, the cries of children at play, the soft, unique word of a woman in love, the advice of a cautious friend? Bring these to his mind, Demodocus, make him weep.

DEMODOCUS. But what if he suddenly reproaches us for abandoning him on Lemnos?

ODYSSEUS. Swear to our innocence and our good will. Did we plot the serpent's bite? Did we bribe the oracle? He was one of ours, we loved the man! No; counter with a solemn chord: duty, Demodocus, duty to our nation and to our cause: the call to arms. What man shall disobey? Troy, sitting like a harpy across the Hellespont, cramming down our ships, our goods, our sailors, Troy must be, shall be cut down!

SIXTH SOLDIER. Grant it, oh Gods!

ODYSSEUS. This is war! Not a children's game. Impress him with this, Demodocus: that you are serious; that there is no room in these matters for selfish resentments and private quarrels. You yourself are here on a mission, under orders—not on a holiday in the islands: a Greek, not a rootless outlaw or a savage. Let him indulge his tastes

Mandel's
poetry
to him
(pop us)

and his antagonisms and his appetites; but only, I say, only after having done his duty to Greece.

FIRST SOLDIER. This is soundly spoken, Odysseus. What a pity Philoctetes is not here now. You would have persuaded him already.

DEMODOCUS. Yes, your words carry a great deal of weight, as always, Odysseus. You are a king. It is only human to have misgivings, of course, but I will do my best to follow your instructions. Shall I let Philoctetes know that his father is dead, and that his son, like your own Telemachus, reigns while he waits for his father's return? ODYSSEUS. What do you think?

DEMODOCUS. I should like to. How moved he will be! And then thankful to us, which is important.

ODYSSEUS. Nevertheless, I have to overrule you. No doubt he will ask you for news; but you will pretend to know nothing of his affairs. This will whet his appetite for a return among those of us who know. Perhaps you can say that you have heard rumors, but are they about him or about somebody else? You don't know. You would give him security, even the security of misery; I will play on his anxiety. DEMODOCUS. It will be hard for me.

[Enter the NINTH SOLDIER]

NINTH SOLDIER. Odysseus, away from here!

ODYSSEUS. Is he coming?

NINTH SOLDIER. Yes! I saw two men from my hill—still in the distance, but coming this way; one limping, carrying the bow—the bow, do you hear? The other walking two steps behind. Philoctetes and Medon, as sure as there is water in the sea!

ODYSSEUS. Good work. Recall the other men. Run. Demodocus, stand before the cave. Speak boldly to him. When he grows soft, suddenly I appear. I disclose the oracle's revelation. You and I, astonished to meet. Have we left traces here?

FIRST SOLDIER. I think not.

[The NINTH and TENTH SOLDIERS return]

TENTH SOLDIER. We've signaled the other man, Odysseus; he'll be here in a minute.

ODYSSEUS. Good. Remember: not a word about the bow, the prophecy, and the Trojans. They're for me to manage. [The last man arrives] Hurry up, fool. All present? No one missing?

FIRST SOLDIER. All present, Odysseus.

ODYSSEUS. Withdraw to a safe distance but without leaving Demodocus exposed. [To the TENTH SOLDIER] You, follow me to the ship. [To the FIRST SOLDIER] You, deploy your men and send runners to report to me. Demodocus, good luck.

base needs,
but no
dislosure
of family
revelation
- controlled
at p.

DEMODOCUS. Depend on me. [ODYSSEUS and the TENTH SOLDIER leave] Friends, I think I will stand a little farther off, and choose the best moment.

[He leaves]

[The CHORUS speaks with flute and drum]

SECOND SOLDIER. Does your heart beat like mine, comrades? FIRST SOLDIER. Zeus! Be with us. Zeus! Now this man comes, and already the stench of him sickens us. Zeus! Make him pliant, bend him to us, let him shift his ways like the stream when it parts and yields before the commanding rock. Zeus! Sharpen the words of Demodocus, let each syllable be a hook to catch the soul of this man. Zeus! We are your people. Will you forsake us? Are we to die in the futile plain where bones of our brothers lie, men once ordinary, men once reasonably content, lying now where the oak, the tamarisk, and the myrtle grew, become a barren country, yellow with war, pocked with spears and rusted swords and shreds of armor, while the vultures scrape in the skulls for meat. Zeus! Give us this man and his weapon, and the end of this abomination!

SEVERAL. So be it!

THIRD SOLDIER. Men, do you know how old I was when I enlisted for the war? Twenty years old, having barely tasted the pleasure of being a man, of attracting a woman's sly glances, of taking my place in the Assembly, uttering my first words there, surprised almost that I was taken seriously, no longer a boy, beginning the best years of a man; and these years, oh my friends, these strong years in which I should have found a kind wife, in which I might have established a house and grown in wealth and reputation, I have spent them like a beast among beasts in the sand; yes, my mouth filled with sand when we crawled on the beach and drove back the Trojans in the first onslaught, like a beast sweating and growling, muck-covered, swearing over dice, scratching the blood off the rings I stole from the dead—me, the son of a good man, Schedios of Pronnoi, before whom even now I would blush to say a foul word.

FOURTH SOLDIER. This is my story too.

FIFTH SOLDIER. Fifteen years we are children, fifteen years we are old men; and the little space between, must we spend it howling in the attack, luckless if we die, luckless if we live, life either killed or wasted? And why? Why? What is it to us, I ask, though timidly?

SIXTH SOLDIER. Why are we driven and driven?

SEVENTH SOLDIER. Because.

EIGHTH SOLDIER. Because.

quantities

Manifest destiny

4 US freedoms

Average (G.I.)

NINTH SOLDIER. Because.

[Three drum-beats]

FOURTH SOLDIER. Zeus, give us quick victory!

SEVENTH SOLDIER. Give Philoctetes and the mysterious bow to us who are dumb, we confess it, to us who fight as our fathers did, who cannot devise and invent, whose minds cope day by day: good people, effective enough, and loyal even when we grumble, but needing help when troubles grow outrageous.

SECOND SOLDIER. Help is near, my friends.

NINTH SOLDIER. Oh the beaches of Troy, though we sail home at last, will hold our shadows as if engraved on the sand.

SIXTH SOLDIER. Even the living have epitaphs.

[DEMODOCUS appears]

DEMODOCUS. He's coming! Scatter! Back to the ships!

FIRST SOLDIER. We'll move a little way off, Demodocus, as Odysseus commanded.

[All leave]

SCENE 2

PHILOCTETES. Let me stop awhile, Medon. The wheel of pain turns again. We could sit down awhile. [MEDON offers to help him] No no; sit farther off. Why should you suffer my suffering? This stench oozes into my very sleep and pollutes my dreams; and you so patient, with a divine pretense of not noticing. Let me rest. The breeze cools my wound and sings like an old nurse. Clean Lemnos. I feel better. Medon, I'll help you pluck our catch for the day. No masters and servants here. Philoctetes works with his hands. Look. Thick. Hard. Efficient. I am now, good sir, become worthy of being a slave, having learned to work. Did you see how I shot the wild geese? I hardly aimed. Oh, I could have been Troy's horror—all Troy a giant boar, and my uncanny arrow—now!—dying it falls, moaning, and then my knife violent in its belly. How did this ugly thought come to me? . . . How cool it is. If only I could smell the fragrance that must be here. Yes, I know, the birds must be plucked. I am so tired. Why should I lie to you? The venom is mounting again. God, what is the purpose of such pain? Go into the cave by yourself, Medon. Leave me. I must be alone.

[MEDON enters the cave. PHILOCTETES sits moaning, his bow across his knees, and loses consciousness. DEMODOCUS appears. He stands motionless at a distance from PHILOCTETES. Gradually PHILOCTETES regains consciousness. He opens his eyes and sees DEMODOCUS. He leaps up and aims an arrow]

we the (dumb) people

U.S. equality

PHILOCTETES. Medon! Your sword! Men on the island!

[MEDON rushes out of the cave, armed]

PHILOCTETES. Stand back!

DEMODOCUS. Peace, my friends. I am a man who can do no harm. A castaway.

PHILOCTETES. A liar, maybe. Stay where you are. Who is here with you?

DEMODOCUS. No one. I am alone. No one else survived.

PHILOCTETES. You were shipwrecked?

DEMODOCUS. Yes.

PHILOCTETES. Your clothes are dry. You don't look exhausted.

DEMODOCUS. I had a calm journey of it on my raft for a whole day. And I slept a full night in a tree by the beach.

PHILOCTETES. Take his dagger, Medon.

[MEDON does so]

DEMODOCUS. You are welcome to it, my friends, whoever you are.

PHILOCTETES. What's your name?

DEMODOCUS. Demodocus, son of Terpius.

PHILOCTETES. A Greek!

DEMODOCUS. A citizen of Ithaca. But your voice fills me with fear. Will you treat me as a guest, or will you injure me? I have neither money nor goods.

PHILOCTETES. Money! The Greek says money! You'll come to no harm unless you look for it. How did your ship go down? An enemy? A storm?

DEMODOCUS. A storm. Will you not tell me where I am? Did I land on an island? Tenedos, perhaps?

PHILOCTETES. This is Lemnos.

DEMODOCUS. Lemnos! Then you—is it possible? You are Philoctetes! Alive!

PHILOCTETES. [Lowering the bow]. You know my name.

DEMODOCUS. Who doesn't? Philoctetes! Unbelievable! How many times your story has been retold around the campfire—you—lord of Malis—bitten in the foot on that cursed island of Chryse—and I live to see you! Oh we have wondered and wondered, are they alive, he and his companion?

PHILOCTETES. What campfire is this? Not before Troy, surely?

DEMODOCUS. Troy too surely. Lucky man, not even to know. Yes, before Troy. Still before Troy.

PHILOCTETES. Amazing. And you are one of the Greeks? An officer?

DEMODOCUS. I am.

PHILOCTETES. I don't remember you.

DEMODOCUS. I was never among the first, and then ten years ago,

Philoctetes, I was a mere boy. You couldn't know me then. And even now I am better known among the Greeks for my singing than for my fighting, though even as a fighter I am not helpless.

PHILOCTETES. And was it for singing a false note, my friend, that the honest Greeks set you on a ship and sent you off?

DEMODOCUS. No, I am not an exile. I was sent to levy a thousand men in Messenia—laggards!—but the storm wrecked our ship; and I, perhaps, am the only survivor.

PHILOCTETES. The war is hungry.

DEMODOCUS. Too, too hungry. Last year—

PHILOCTETES. Tell me no stories. Keep your nightmares to yourself, and take advantage of your accident; explain it as intended by the Gods. Come, sit down; stretch your limbs, and feel what peace is like.

[MEDON brings a bowl of water and a dish of fruit]

DEMODOCUS. I feel it already in every bone, kind Philoctetes. The change is so sudden, I keep wondering, is it myself talking here? And to Philoctetes! Who would have thought it! Chatting under the trees. Trees! If you saw the plain before Troy. Scarred, sacked, cracked, every leaf and every blade of grass blasted. The heather uprooted. Bones and sand and mud. And now I sit here drinking clean water and eating figs.

PHILOCTETES. Tonight you will eat a curd of boar's milk and honey we call "the gift of Meleager." Other dishes too, oddities I promise you'll enjoy. Not a bad place is it, for a man who was drowning this morning?

DEMODOCUS. Yesterday, Philoctetes. Oh, this is Elysium.

PHILOCTETES. Later we'll walk halfway up a cliff to watch the night drifting in. Night without ambush. Night without blood. Take it: the island is yours. It lies in the Aegean like a pillow for the weary sailor.

DEMODOCUS. You are infinitely courteous. Ten years of solitude have not coarsened you. But tell me. I suppose that other men have landed here, recently perhaps.

PHILOCTETES. Perhaps.

DEMODOCUS. Who. When?

PHILOCTETES. I don't know. We've seen no one.

DEMODOCUS. No one? In all the years?

PHILOCTETES. Why do you ask so suspiciously?

DEMODOCUS. Not suspiciously, my friend, only with surprise. The Trojans, we understand, sail freely among these islands.

PHILOCTETES. They are welcome if they land here.

DEMODOCUS. The enemy?

PHILOCTETES. You are my enemy too. Mankind is my enemy.

800
22-06

Promised
land

DEMODOCUS. Why such a cruel word, Philoctetes? PHILOCTETES. Why such a cruel word! Medon, did you hear this? I thank you of course—you made a gesture—oh, I notice!—yet you mastered yourself. But your fellow Greeks did not make the effort. Let me tell you what they did. They manacled me. Me, Philoctetes, like a slave caught stealing a herring. Your master Odysseus—you know it!—dragged me here manacled and threw me on the ground like a sack of garbage and hoped I would die. But I didn't die. I live to enjoy their dying. That's justice of a kind.

DEMODOCUS. Forgive me, Philoctetes. My words were rash.

PHILOCTETES. Peace. I flare up too easily. Besides, I have no grievance. This island has been my happiness. Never did I dream when I was a boy, wishing I could be another Heracles, that I should find this perfection. Yet I hate the Greeks who brought it to me. Take the paradox.

DEMODOCUS. I understand. It was not perfection they meant for you. And yet—let me ask you—is there not a thrust in your flesh toward your own brothers? Do you ever wonder, do you ever feel a small questioning ache, would you not like me to tell you whether your old companions are still alive, or how they fare—Agamemnon and pitiful Menelaus, the mountainous Ajax, Meriones, audacious Diomedes, old Nestor, Achilles perhaps, and his companion the generous Patroclus, or even, even my own master Odysseus?

PHILOCTETES. Your master Odysseus! That ragged, thirsty, patched-up king of Ithaca! Ithaca—excuse me—where people eat stones for supper! Ithaca had a king! Go on, be offended, my lad, but don't I remember him in the early days, when he saw himself sitting in Troy on a red cushion, a leg of mutton in each hand, and ten coffers of gold stowed away in his ship! And Agamemnon—no fool, I'll grant him that—invisible Agamemnon had visions of himself Emperor of Asia, he envied the centipedes because he had only two feet for people to kiss. I was more modest. A little gold, a little reputation, a few slave girls, I didn't ask for much, I was a villain of the tenth rank.

DEMODOCUS. You are a hard man, Philoctetes. Are we all bandits? Wasn't there a shred of justice in our going against Troy?

PHILOCTETES. Of course there was! Plenty of justice, my boy, Troy was a nest of pirates. An avalanche of justice! There's the beauty of your human affairs, crime and justice are bosom friends, famous allies; why, nothing's more deadly than a cause stinking with justice; but I, Philoctetes, I shook it all off the way a dog shakes the water off his back after a dip in the sea. A man stops being a bandit only when he's alone.

DEMODOCUS. Your anger burns through me. It convinces me that I should not tell you anything about these men, these criminals. Not even who died.

PHILOCTETES. Ah? Some of them died? Some of the great ones, I hope.

DEMODOCUS. Can you expect otherwise, after ten years?

PHILOCTETES. I will ask you one question. I had a father at home, a wife, a son—a son eight years old—and two younger brothers. . . .

DEMODOCUS. I don't know anything, Philoctetes. If only I did. Bad news is better than none. If you were among us again, you would find out, your son, your wife, your father. . . .

PHILOCTETES. I can live without news. My question was a formality. I've become another man. I will show you my world by and by what I and Medon have accomplished. You will ask the questions, believe me.

Mine was a formality. I've captured the sun's rays; a river moves wheels for me; I made this bow, which can do—God knows what; I have an orchard; the hedgehog and the mole give me their hides; I have hemp for my nets; the porcupine supplies me with needles. The wild olive grows here, and wild barley too. I gather saffron on the hillside for spice. We baked our first bread from crushed acorns, will you believe it? Sometimes we kill a boar. From the sea we catch mullet, bass, bream, and tunny; from the air and ground pheasants, quail, geese, rock-doves. But greatest wonder of all, here where men left me to rot, in this silence I can think at last. I ask questions of the stream and the tree leaf, of the spider and the seashell. Shall I tell you? I send my spirit prowling the night sky among the stars, like a child in dark streets who sees lights in the windows and puzzles at who and what is within. You, poor fools, your claptrap notions, as soon as they go outdoors, they stumble over "I am not paid enough!" or "Will the neighbors sneer?" or "My wife is growing fat!" Pah! Give me no news. Rid yourself instead of those "Messenian laggards" who are eating at your eyes and mouth. Oh, I notice!

DEMODOCUS. You notice my perplexity, Philoctetes, my admiration, my envy. We don't hear words like yours from Agamemnon! [Silence] Agamemnon is still alive, you see.

PHILOCTETES. Ah?

DEMODOCUS. And Menelaus too.

PHILOCTETES. Achilles defending them, of course, with a great bluster.

DEMODOCUS. No more, Philoctetes.

PHILOCTETES. Impossible. Achilles could die? Who killed Achilles?

DEMODOCUS. Hardly believable, but Paris did, with an arrow, by ignoble chance.

PHILOCTETES. And another chance shall kill Paris. But you, I imagine,

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are still hungry. Medon! Bring our young soldier a loaf of bread and a dish of plums. I talk like a lord! No wine, alas; but we do have bread of a kind. [MEDON serves and reenters the cave] Barley, you see, un-leavened, not fit for a young nobleman.

DEMODOCUS. Excellent. Excellent. I marvel at you. The longer I am here—no, I daren't say it.

PHILOCTETES. Dare! Dare! I am perfectly meek.

DEMODOCUS. Then I will dare and tell you that I have a great wish, in spite of your anger, to lure you to Ilium with me—even on a raft. We need your hundred skills, your godly genius. At every council you, Philoctetes, are openly missed. And think of it—Achilles dead, Patroclus dead, Idomeneus dead, Leucus dead, Orsilocus dead, Creton dead, Menestheus dead—

PHILOCTETES. Yes yes yes yes, slaughter, dead dead dead. Enough, you are trying to make me weep; and I do, I do. Scoundrels! Yet there they lie on the sand, their brains smashed, their guts filling with maggots. But your Odysseus, is he still alive? No, tell me no more; what is it to me?

DEMODOCUS. He is still alive, God be thanked, and Diomedes too, but the glory is gone, and we remain on the plain of Ilium by a kind of habit, as if we had lost every other talent.

PHILOCTETES. Come, Demodocus, forget Troy. We have been two in this colony these many years, and now we'll be three.

DEMODOCUS. How is this possible? I was sent on a mission.

PHILOCTETES. I spit on your mission. Digging a grave for a thousand men. Look about you, my friend, and thank God he has delivered you. There's room on Lemnos for another man. You shall refresh us.

DEMODOCUS. Ah, if I were free, Philoctetes. . . . The truth is that I am sick of the noise and smell of other men, the hearty and disgusting comradeship, the bellowing in unison. Not even a privy to oneself. Fifty pallets on the ground in a row. A table where a hundred eat together. No thought without a chorus. Finally, you begin to confide over a cup of wine to a dozen bearded, swilling solitudes—out go your dearest secrets—you hate it afterwards; you are emptied into a gutter. Am I a man, you cry, am I a man or am I the cell of a polyp? PHILOCTETES [*in pain*]. The cell of a polyp. My friend—don't stop—I hear it all—welcome now—

DEMODOCUS. You're ill! What can I do?

PHILOCTETES. The pain again again. Look at me! A prince plagued by a foot! No—don't call Medon. I have troubled him enough.

DEMODOCUS. Tell me what I can do.

PHILOCTETES. Nothing. The wheel can't be stopped. Hold me. No. Stay away. [*Demodocus is averting and covering his face*] My friend—pity me—the Gods have cursed me. I don't know why. I was innocent!

DEMODOCUS. Is there no relief?

PHILOCTETES. No. I fall down and die for awhile and foul my cave. Wait for me. I can bear it.

DEMODOCUS. The bow is heavy. Let me hold it for you. I shall be waiting here.

[*Philoctetes gives him the bow*]

PHILOCTETES. You are kind. Medon! Medon!

[*He stumbles into the cave*]

DEMODOCUS. The bow in my hands! Kindness is rewarded.

[*The CHORUS speaks with drum*]

SIXTH SOLDIER. Demodocus!

DEMODOCUS. Yes.

SECOND SOLDIER. Not so loud.

FIRST SOLDIER. We heard everything. Masterfully done!

SECOND SOLDIER. Masterfully!

FIRST SOLDIER. At first we worried. "Why doesn't he obey his instructions?" we asked each other. And suddenly you call out to him—"Give me the bow"—and he gives it to you like a child.

SECOND SOLDIER. You have to remember that he doesn't know how important it is.

[*Enter the THIRD SOLDIER*]

THIRD SOLDIER [*to the FIRST SOLDIER*]. We've sent the man, sir.

DEMODOCUS. Where have you sent what man?

FIRST SOLDIER. One of our men to inform Odysseus.

DEMODOCUS. Of what, busybody? Is it your duty to spy on me? FIRST SOLDIER. No sir. My duty is to execute my orders. But why wait for Odysseus to come? We've got the bow.

THIRD SOLDIER. Now's the time to bolt.

FOURTH SOLDIER. But is this the bow we want?

FIFTH SOLDIER. Of course! Oh, I could dance and shout!

DEMODOCUS. Hands off! What I do with the bow concerns me.

FIRST SOLDIER. Do with the bow? What *can* you do with the bow? We have it! Have it!

SEVENTH SOLDIER. Why stand and wait here, Demodocus? Let's go and meet Odysseus halfway.

EIGHTH SOLDIER. I know why he hesitates.

SECOND SOLDIER. Why?

SIXTH SOLDIER. He has made friends with Philoctetes.

U.S. need for own room

U.S. need for own room

U.S. need for own room

EIGHTH SOLDIER. No, I didn't mean that. Don't you remember that we really want Philoctetes himself? Who knows whether we can copy this bow? Whether we can handle it? What's it made of? Why does it have that curious knob in the middle? What kind of arrows does it take? I wouldn't dare use it. With this bow, the oracle said, we are doomed to win the war. But it's come into our hands too easily, that's all.

FOURTH SOLDIER. Are we sure this is really the bow itself?

FIFTH SOLDIER. Always a doubter in the crowd. Always a questioner. FIRST SOLDIER. Demodocus, no more of this—let's take the bow to the ship and reason with Philoctetes afterward.

SECOND SOLDIER. From a position of strength.

THIRD SOLDIER. A bird in hand.

DEMODOCUS. A man who trusted me in the middle of my lies gave me the bow to safekeep for him.

FIRST SOLDIER. You asked and took it.

DEMODOCUS. He gave it to me! What if I walked into the cave while you stare at me and placed it in his companion's hand, scoundrel that I am?

FIRST SOLDIER. And the war?

FIFTH SOLDIER. We've got orders, Demodocus.

SIXTH SOLDIER. The whole army!

SECOND SOLDIER. Demodocus has made friends with Philoctetes.

SIXTH SOLDIER. That's what I said before.

SEVENTH SOLDIER. Why not? Philoctetes is a Greek.

SIXTH SOLDIER. A Greek! Did you hear him talk about the Greeks? He would eat us all boiled and salted if he could. And Demodocus was supposed to win him over. Instead it was Philoctetes who won *him* over.

FIFTH SOLDIER. The Trojans will get the bow! I see it!

SEVERAL. Quiet! God forbid! What next?

THIRD SOLDIER. Yes, the Trojans! Why not? They'll send Pandarus or another one of their professionals, somebody who won't mind a few lies and a length of dagger in the back if that's the way to purchase the bow.

FIRST SOLDIER. Demodocus, come with us, orders must be obeyed.

THIRD SOLDIER. Don't hesitate.

FIFTH SOLDIER. In another few minutes it will be too late.

SIXTH SOLDIER. Odysseus is your master.

SEVENTH SOLDIER. You'll repent it if he gets wind of this.

EIGHTH SOLDIER. And if you anger him.

SECOND SOLDIER. Stop! I hear steps.

[Enter, running, the NINTH SOLDIER]

NINTH SOLDIER. Here is Odysseus! Stand ready!

SCENE 3

[Enter ODYSSEUS, accompanied by the TENTH SOLDIER]

FIRST SOLDIER. Odysseus, we've got the bow!

ODYSSEUS. Childishness. Where is Philoctetes?

DEMODOCUS. He became sick. He's in the cave, unconscious.

ODYSSEUS. Medon is with him?

DEMODOCUS. Yes.

ODYSSEUS. What did you tell him?

DEMODOCUS. I served him the lie about the raft; I shrewdly aroused his longing for home and companionship; I successfully concealed your presence; I secured his sympathy by envying his manner of life; and I skillfully extracted the bow from his fingers. No, I did so well he foisted it on me.

ODYSSEUS. What have we here?

FIRST SOLDIER. See for yourself, Odysseus.

ODYSSEUS. An attack of sarcasm! What's the meaning of this? Hand me the bow.

DEMODOCUS. Why?

ODYSSEUS. Am I to give reasons? Hand me the bow!

DEMODOCUS. Odysseus, let me wait here until Philoctetes recovers. With your permission I shall reveal the truth to him and ask his pardon for my lies. I will even return the weapon to him. Then man to man, openly and clearly, you can summon him to Troy. This will be the real glory for us: to win over the man by honest persuasion.

FIRST SOLDIER. Don't stand for this, Odysseus. If you'd heard Philoctetes as we did, you'd know nothing will make him fight on our side. He says "Greek" the way a tiger growls.

ODYSSEUS. Is this true?

DEMODOCUS. Let me speak with him again. Give me more time. Think of his gratitude when we return—

ODYSSEUS. No. The man is obstinate. I know him well. The oracle's message must be conveyed to him without more preambles. I am glad you have the bow, however. I like him better disarmed. Take it back to the ship, my son. I'll wait here, talk to him as quietly as I am talking to you, and persuade him to return with us.

DEMODOCUS. And if he refuses? Now that I have made him helpless?

ODYSSEUS. Go back to the ship.

DEMODOCUS. What if, in his anger, he prefers the Trojans?

ODYSSEUS. Go back to the ship.

DEMODOCUS. I wish to stay here.

FIRST SOLDIER. This is open mutiny, Odysseus.

SECOND SOLDIER. I'm not surprised. Always two steps behind every-

American way.
rhetoric if possible

body, and arguing, arguing, arguing.

THIRD SOLDIER. Argue Troy down if you can!

FOURTH SOLDIER. One man leaps up a battlement, sword in hand; another argues whether swords are fair weapons.

FIFTH SOLDIER. He acts as though he were the only man tired of war.

SIXTH SOLDIER. Ten years of bloody filth and now we're to lie down and die because we're too delicate!

EIGHTH SOLDIER. Give us the bow!

ODYSSEUS. Patience, my friends. All will be done gently. I myself, as it happens, do not question the loyalty of Demodocus. I understand his scruples. And yet, I don't know, I am no weakling; and we are many against one. We might have a scrap, shed some blood, but we could subdue him.

DEMODOCUS. What are you saying? Would I fight you? Never! No, I ask you simply as a man—

ODYSSEUS [*changing his tone*]. Ask me nothing. Men, draw your swords.

Demodocus, I order you to take the bow to the ship. If you refuse, I advance on you myself. As I do, let the rest of you rush against him; if I die, take the bow, kill him, and kill Philoctetes.

DEMODOCUS. You're not serious!

ODYSSEUS. We'll see. You take me for a coward or a clown. [*He draws his sword. DEMODOCUS half raises the bow. ODYSSEUS throws his sword to the ground and slowly advances on the puzzled DEMODOCUS. DEMODOCUS retreats as far as he can.*]

DEMODOCUS. Stop! Stop! [*He leaps away and disappears in the direction of the beach. ODYSSEUS picks up his sword and sheathes it. The others do likewise*]

ODYSSEUS. The bow is ours. But it's Philoctetes himself we want.

SEVENTH SOLDIER. And Demodocus? Surely you are not going to forgive him!

THIRD SOLDIER. He is a traitor, Odysseus. Will you not arraign him before the Assembly?

ODYSSEUS. I, not you, shall decide who is a traitor.

NINTH SOLDIER. The point is: we have the bow!

FIRST SOLDIER. And now for Philoctetes.

ODYSSEUS. Now for Philoctetes. Stand aside, men. I shall take my place here.

FIFTH SOLDIER. In the open?

ODYSSEUS. Man to man.

[*The CHORUS withdraws, except for the TENTH SOLDIER*]

ODYSSEUS. Stay.

TENTH SOLDIER. Yes, sir.

ODYSSEUS. I learned from Demodocus what I sent him for: how bitter

the man is against us. I expected the worst; the worst is what I found.
TENTH SOLDIER. Yes.

ODYSSEUS. I will beg him again.

TENTH SOLDIER. God grant you success.

ODYSSEUS. I may fail. [*The soldier looks down*] Are you, are you all ready?

TENTH SOLDIER. My lord—

ODYSSEUS. Are you ready? God strike you!

TENTH SOLDIER. We are.

ODYSSEUS. Look out for my signal. If Zeus is merciful, I will not give it. If I give it, be prompt. The blood is on my head, not yours; but yours will answer if you disobey.

TENTH SOLDIER. You are the master, Odysseus. I am ready.

The CHORUS speaks with harp and flute

FIRST SOLDIER. Let us speak in praise of our lord Odysseus. To speak his praise is a lovely task, because whatever the brain shapes privately concerning this man, the mouth is glad to utter, and not only in the house, to father or wife or children, but in the market place, in the Assembly, to all men. It makes a man happy when he means his praise, when he bows because of the veneration he truly feels, when he presses a hand because he loves. Now, as is fitting, I will be the man to begin.

SECOND SOLDIER. What will you praise in Odysseus?

FIRST SOLDIER. I will praise his rank among the Greeks. Though he rules a harsh land, Ithaca, which has not grain enough to feed itself, and where few trees grow among the many-colored rocks, he is the man most honored by Agamemnon. Achilles was the stronger man; but he was proud, fierce, and factious. Menelaus is Agamemnon's brother, but he is a weak soldier, one who always leans against another. Diomedes is supreme in the battlefield; but he fights even in his dreams, even in his tent at supper, even in the Assembly. To every concern brought forward in the Assembly, he answers, "Fight!" Idomeneus was the richer man; he was king of Crete; he could plunge a hand into the treasury of magnificent Egypt; his palaces were thick and strong, with deep foundations; he called us rustics; yet because of all this, half of his mind stayed at home and only with the other half did he attend to our war. And still he died. No. Agamemnon's true brother is Odysseus, though Odysseus came to him with only twelve ships—he had no more. Odysseus is strong, wise, loyal: in the fight a fighter, in council a counselor, and, I will add, at supper a merry man. Agamemnon has said in public, "While Odysseus remains at my side, I will not lift the siege of Troy, I will

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never be disheartened. But if Odysseus chose to despair and withdrew from us, I too would give up." So much has Agamemnon himself said.

SECOND SOLDIER. Now let me speak of Odysseus the ruler of Ithaca. How did he come to rule? By means of conquest? By sly murder of his betters? By bribing the old men? By promising the riches of the Hesperides to our poor country? Not so. But by unanimous applause and election, promising nothing, threatening no one. And I ask you all, my friends, to tell his achievements.

THIRD SOLDIER. He taught us to build houses as fine as those of proud Argos.

FOURTH SOLDIER. He cleared the roads of bandits by hanging some and giving work to others.

FIFTH SOLDIER. He gave the poor bread without robbing the rich.

SIXTH SOLDIER. He proclaimed the festival of Pallas Athene, at which the young compete in the chariot race and the wrestling and the spear-throwing while the whole island, assembled, relaxes, takes sides, and is refreshed by idleness.

SEVENTH SOLDIER. He rescued the debtors from prison and proclaimed a full remission of all unpaid taxes.

EIGHTH SOLDIER. He gave us courts of justice and made an end of private revenge and family vendettas.

THIRD SOLDIER. He gave us peace without sloth—

FOURTH SOLDIER. And prosperity without vice.

FIFTH SOLDIER. Let me speak in my turn of Odysseus the master. I was a smith in his household before I became a soldier. And you too, my friend—

SEVENTH SOLDIER. I was a farmer.

FIFTH SOLDIER. You shall witness the truth of what I say. Did he ever speak brutally to any of us? He did not. Did he work us half to death, so that we lacked the living life on which to spend our earnings? He did not. Rather he came among us, taught us what he knew, and amazing to us, the poor, he asked to be shown; took the hammer in his own hands, spat like one of us, rolled back his sleeves, and worked.

SEVENTH SOLDIER. Once when my leg was lame he took the plow from me and turned the soil behind the ox all day long under the sun.

FIFTH SOLDIER. Singing—do you remember?—singing all the while! So that we glowed brighter than the hot iron and worked like Cyclops to please him.

SEVENTH SOLDIER. And he gave us sudden holidays. "Go, my lads," he said, "it's been a month since the harvest feast; time for a twelve-hour

carouse!" Laughing as he talked, and going about boxing with the boys of the village.

EIGHTH SOLDIER. Now I will speak of Odysseus the husband and father. Noble Telemachus, his son, walks gravely by his side as he visits his people, or sits close by when he delivers judgment. He is less strong, less lively than his father; more sober, perhaps more delicate, more studious. But strong love binds these two men together. Have you seen Odysseus lean toward his son, whisper a question into his ear, receive a reply, and nod in approval? Wise is the father who knows how to flatter his son; who takes, or seems to take, advice from him. And from the day Telemachus was born, Odysseus himself raised him. He did not fear smiles by entering the nursery and seeing that the linen was washed. He was the boy's tutor, playmate, guide, and father; until it happened that, although Telemachus was only in his seventeenth year when his father left, Odysseus gave him the rule of Ithaca with peace and trust in his soul.

SIXTH SOLDIER. While Penelope his wife, glad and proud, having loved no man before and no man since, waits for the kindest husband who ever lived, in mourning and solitude. And even as she weeps, she is happy in her unhappiness, because the weight of her present misery is the measure of her former joy. Luckless woman, whom the loss of a husband cannot make unhappy! And by this I judge the goodness of Odysseus, that those who knew him best lament his absence most.

THIRD SOLDIER. And in the camp, my friends? Whose tent is empty? That of Odysseus. A man without handy concubines, without purchased whores, without soft-lipped slaves. The others quarrel over a captive and threaten civil war for the sake of a naked woman. They wake at noon from their debauches too destroyed to fight. Only Odysseus keeps faith with his wife. He rises from the banquet gay but clearheaded: even-tempered, his mind firm, his body controlled, his gaze like a prong of light into the dense world.

NINTH SOLDIER. See him now, sitting patiently. His fingers hold the strings of destiny.

FOURTH SOLDIER. Almost a god.

FIRST SOLDIER. Almost a god.

SCENE 4

ODYSSEUS. My friends, I hear a stirring in Philoctetes' mansion. Be vigilant. Philoctetes!

[PHILOCTETES appears. He gives a shrill cry. MEDON, armed with his sword, stands next to him.]

ODYSSEUS. I am Odysseus.

PHILOCTETES. An army of Greeks. I should have known! [*He restrains Medon with his hand.*]

ODYSSEUS. I greet you, and I greet Medon, with affection and respect. I thank the Gods who have kept you full of strong life. Give me a hearing, Philoctetes. Do not condemn us before we have spoken. We come as your brothers.

PHILOCTETES. Odysseus: the same old fox. He sends me a young hypocrite to disarm me, he stalks me with a brace of tall ruffians, he stands before me with his sword out, he murders, and as he murders he cries out Brother!

ODYSSEUS. More gently, Philoctetes. We arrived in a strange land. Who could predict what we should find? We are accustomed to war. But I am reassured and I return my sword to its scabbard.

PHILOCTETES. Always the fox. What are you looking for?

ODYSSEUS. You.

PHILOCTETES. Has the oracle told you that Philoctetes must die?

ODYSSEUS. Far from it. Our solemn mission is to take you back to our ranks.

PHILOCTETES. That is what your accomplice hinted. How affable to poor Philoctetes! Fancy the Greeks at their Assembly one night, the place stinking with corpses. Agamemnon strokes his beard and says, "How I pity Philoctetes! Never has he had his chance of a nobly torn belly or a gloriously broken skull."

ODYSSEUS. Let me speak.

PHILOCTETES. Then Diomedes takes the staff in his hand. "Oh my comrades," he brings out with tears of pity, "let us fetch the poor man back among us to share in our sour wine, our stony bread, our broken bones, and our evening walks among the graves." Then they send Odysseus off with a friend, and all for pity and affection they lie to him, trick him, rob him of his weapon, and trap him in his cave. Now Odysseus, speak up, good and blunt, and if it's blood you want, spare me your apologies.

ODYSSEUS. You treat me, Philoctetes, as though I were childish enough to treat you as a child. I have not come for pity of you. If circumstances require me to liquidate you, I shall do so. This we both know; no fooling between us. As it happens, the oracle pronounces that your good fortune is ours, and ours is yours. A common interest binds us. Will you hear what it is? Or will you bite before the hand is even stretched?

PHILOCTETES. Speak.

ODYSSEUS. The sentence came from Calchas the soothsayer. "Not by

strength alone shall the Greeks overcome Troy, but by strength allied with immortal cunning. Let Pyrrhus, the son of Achilles, be our strength. Let Philoctetes, King of Malis, be our cunning."

PHILOCTETES. King of Malis? King?

ODYSSEUS. Your father is dead and you are king. And in the summer Troy will be toppled. Listen again. Calchas saw your bow in a dream: strong, far-shooting, unerring: its arrows deadlier than those of Crete or Thrace; your secret. Armed each one of us with this bow, we shall send into the bowels of Troy a panic like the trample of a falling mountain. And you, Philoctetes, you will live; you glorious to the end of time: cherished by Greece, your wound forgotten, a sage among men, one of us, Philoctetes, Greek again.

[CHORUS [*low*]]. One of us.

PHILOCTETES. He saw the bow in his dream?

ODYSSEUS. Yes, my friend. Let this persuade you of the truth of all I have told you. How could I have known that such a bow existed? Who knows except you, your companion, and the Gods?

PHILOCTETES. I can't answer you. I've become too simple here, I can't untwist your words.

FIRST SOLDIER. Noble Philoctetes, he speaks the truth.

PHILOCTETES. Well, the bow is in your hands. Demodocus stole it, if that's his name.

ODYSSEUS. Be indulgent with us, Philoctetes. The bow fell into our hands; we should have returned it to you; but we have been soldiers in the field too long; my men would not relinquish it.

PHILOCTETES. Keep it then, my friends, see if you can handle it, go back to your ships, let the pinewood oars fly, and good riddance to you all.

ODYSSEUS. And you?

PHILOCTETES. We stay here. I have my world. I need no other.

ODYSSEUS. Return with us, Philoctetes. Let the bow be your gift to us. Let us receive it from you, the man himself, and allow us to acknowledge you our friend, benefactor, and savior.

PHILOCTETES. I am satisfied here. You took the bow. Go back to Agamemnon.

ODYSSEUS. The bow is not enough, Philoctetes.

PHILOCTETES. I thought not! Away! Forget me!

ODYSSEUS. Ten years of loneliness is enough. Who can bear such loneliness? Medon may die.

PHILOCTETES. God forbid! I am the older man. I will be the first to die.

ODYSSEUS. Perhaps not. God may not forbid. And then what will become of you? You will howl on your knees and go mad. A man must live among his kind.

PHILOCTETES. Ruffian! Back to Troy! You are not my kind!

FIRST SOLDIER. Odysseus! I hear somebody running.

SEVENTH SOLDIER. There! There!

ODYSSEUS. Demodocus!

CHORUS. Stop!

[*DEMODOCUS rushes up to PHILOCTETES and thrusts the bow into his hands*]

DEMODOCUS. Your bow, Philoctetes! Forgive me!

PHILOCTETES [*aiming at ODYSSEUS*]. Back Odysseus, back! All the arrows, Medon!

ODYSSEUS. Back, men!

CHORUS. Oh God, help us!

PHILOCTETES. Stand back! Medon, look sharp. Back! Back!

ODYSSEUS [*to the Greeks*]. No violence, my friends. All in good time. I admire Demodocus in a way. I deplore what he did; I who thought he was speeding to our ships! But I admire him. It was his conscience.

DEMODOCUS. Why do you always jeer, Odysseus?

PHILOCTETES. Hands off your swords, all of you! Eyes open, Medon. Odysseus; don't stand there. Call your gang together and clear the island. The wind will be rising soon.

DEMODOCUS. Odysseus, this is our war, not his. Or his if he sees fit. And besides: I am no boy for dirty errands.

ODYSSEUS. We shall sit here and wait till nightfall.

PHILOCTETES. But if by nightfall you're not sailing in your ship, I will shoot you straight and happy through the heart.

ODYSSEUS. Let that be as it may. Patience. [*He sits on a rock and gives a discreet sign with his hand. The tenth soldier whispers into the ears of the NINTH, EIGHTH, and SEVENTH, and the four quietly leave*]

DEMODOCUS [*to PHILOCTETES*]. I will try to protect you.

PHILOCTETES. What are you doing?

DEMODOCUS. Going back.

PHILOCTETES. Don't be a fool, Demodocus; stay here. Odysseus is wait-

ing to pounce on you. You're a traitor to Greece. Congratulations!

DEMODOCUS. I think otherwise. Odysseus, for once let a younger man

persuade you. My tongue is cleansed. Allow me to plead with him.

He trusts me now.

ODYSSEUS. Suit yourself, my lad.

[*DEMODOCUS advances toward the Greeks*]

PHILOCTETES. Don't be a fool!

ODYSSEUS. Take him! [*The soldiers leap at DEMODOCUS. MEDON, ready to*

rush to his help, is restrained by PHILOCTETES]

DEMODOCUS. Scum!

ODYSSEUS. Hold the boy. From behind. Lock his arms. Bind his wrists.

Now then, that's one.

Odys
still
realpolitik

DEMODOCUS. Fool, fool, fool.

PHILOCTETES [*to MEDON*]. The other opening must be guarded. Didn't you see? A few of them slunk away. Go in and keep watch. [*MEDON obeys*] Is that how you'll tempt me to return to Troy? Demodocus, keep heart. The game isn't finished yet. Bandits! Leap at me! Leap! Take my corpse to Troy! Manacle my corpse this time!

ODYSSEUS. Philoctetes! Once more! Return with us! How easily we could capture you!

PHILOCTETES. You don't know what my bow can do. Go back without me, rascals!

DEMODOCUS. They can't, Philoctetes! They must kill you if necessary! They are afraid you'll cross to the Trojans!

[*The soldier guarding him forces DEMODOCUS to his knees. DEMODOCUS cries out with pain*]

PHILOCTETES. The Trojans are coming too! Of course! Let Hector have the bow! I'll make my home with them!

ODYSSEUS. Poor Hector. Hector is dead! But you are right, the Trojans are coming. You are more than right: the Trojans have come! [*He claps his hands*] I was about to mention them when Demodocus spoke for me. I thank him.

FIRST SOLDIER. When did they land?

ODYSSEUS. Bring in the Trojans! Now my children, watch carefully. Surprise Odysseus? Where is the man? There will be no Trojans to traffic with, Philoctetes; I am going to teach you an unforgettable lesson. [*Enter the four soldiers carrying two litters, each with a dead man on it*] Look at your Trojan saviors. They are the last ones you will ever see.

Demodocus is wrong. You'll rot alone in this place.

FIRST SOLDIER. Odysseus, we are all amazed. What happened?

ODYSSEUS. One of our patrols found a small Trojan craft, and some

twenty men ashore. We took them by surprise and killed them all.

FIRST SOLDIER. With losses on our side?

ODYSSEUS. Not a man. Come, Philoctetes, come and look.

PHILOCTETES [*without moving*]. Odysseus, I tell you once again, take

yourself and your henchmen away. My bow is hungry for you. Be-

ware.

ODYSSEUS. I understand. And I give up. If I take you alive, you will kill

yourself.

PHILOCTETES. Like a fly.

ODYSSEUS. Well, what matters in the end is that we shall have no com-

petitors. There they lie. You can even keep Demodocus. [*He seizes*

DEMODOCUS and pushes him toward PHILOCTETES, who moves farther back]

He's yours. [*He throws DEMODOCUS down with a blow*]

PHILOCTETES. Coward!

[PHILOCTETES has left the opening of the cave unguarded. At a signal from ODYSSEUS, the FIFTH SOLDIER rushes into the cave. PHILOCTETES utters a cry but hesitates]

MEDON [within]. Master!

ODYSSEUS [shouting]. Kill him!

PHILOCTETES. No!

MEDON [within]. Master!

PHILOCTETES. Don't kill him!

CHORUS. Kill!

DEMODOCUS. Kill Odysseus! [ODYSSEUS catches hold of DEMODOCUS and uses him as a shield]

PHILOCTETES. I can't.

ODYSSEUS. Bring Medon out!

[The FIFTH SOLDIER carries MEDON'S body out. With a mighty effort PHILOCTETES breaks his bow in two. He flings himself over the body. ODYSSEUS surrenders DEMODOCUS, still bound, to one of the soldiers]

SIXTH SOLDIER. He broke the bow!

FOURTH SOLDIER. He broke the bow!

PHILOCTETES. In my brain too, the bow is broken. Force me back if you like. My dead body is yours. Oh Heracles, let them perish before Troy all of them, and you, Odysseus, may your corpse be left to the dogs, let them devour you and make you their excrement.

ODYSSEUS. Why do you rail at me, Philoctetes? It is you who killed Medon, not I. Your hatred for us has made you insane. We came here, Greek to Greek, brother to brother, offering you and Medon immortal glory, love and reverence. You raved at us as if we, and not the serpent, had bitten your ankle that foul day in the grove of Chryse. Yet still we offer you the haven of our friendship, still we clamor for your help, still we look upon you as our teacher. And such is our awe for a man marked by the Gods that we will not compel you even now. I now abandon you to your wrath and your misery. I shall report you mysteriously dead amidst a crowd of Trojan corpses, and exhibit these poor victims for proof. The Trojans will not come again. Neither shall we. Never, never will you see a human being again. Soldiers! Sack the cave. Destroy everything.

[Several soldiers enter the cave]

THIRD SOLDIER [low]. Alone . . .

SIXTH SOLDIER [low]. Alone . . .

DEMODOCUS. Philoctetes . . .

PHILOCTETES. What?

DEMODOCUS. I pity you.

PHILOCTETES [to ODYSSEUS]. Release the boy, Odysseus. What does it

matter to you now? Let him stay here.

ODYSSEUS. Break everything, men. Break!

CHORUS. Alone . . .

[The soldiers appear]

SECOND SOLDIER. Everything is smashed.

ODYSSEUS. Drag the body inside—throw it on the heap. It will be stinking soon, stronger than Philoctetes himself. [To the CHORUS] Back to the ship, my friends.

FIRST SOLDIER. Without him?

ODYSSEUS. Without him. He will never give us his secret.

SECOND SOLDIER. No pity for us?

THIRD SOLDIER. For us who have to do the fighting?

FOURTH SOLDIER. For us who only obey orders?

FIFTH SOLDIER. We never meant you any harm.

SIXTH SOLDIER. Harm? We wanted to fall at your feet.

THIRD SOLDIER. The common soldier was always your friend.

SIXTH SOLDIER. What have we got to do with oracles, higher strategy, new weapons, headquarters, military policy?

FIFTH SOLDIER. It is us you punish, not Odysseus, not Agamemnon.

FOURTH SOLDIER. And our wives, our children, who don't even know you.

ODYSSEUS. Away, soldiers. No tears. The bow doesn't matter if no one has it.

[The CHORUS slowly leaves]

PHILOCTETES. Leave me Demodocus! I beg you!

[DEMODOCUS is carried off. The litters with the dead men are taken away too.]

Only ODYSSEUS and PHILOCTETES are left. PHILOCTETES is trembling]

ODYSSEUS. How quiet it is. Nothing but my voice remains. And after me,

nothing. [He draws a dagger, rises and advances toward PHILOCTETES]

PHILOCTETES. You'll murder me? [But ODYSSEUS throws the dagger at PHILOCTETES' feet]

ODYSSEUS. When you are sick of the silence, oh my brother, my brother . . .

[He turns and leaves. PHILOCTETES is alone. He seems bewildered. He enters the cave, and comes out again, a broken man, holding a few scraps. Total

silence. A long time passes. The silence continues. Suddenly he flings himself

toward the far end of the stage, where the Greeks left, and utters a wild cry]

PHILOCTETES. Take me! Odysseus! Take me! [The drum beats hard. The

FOURTH SOLDIER appears] Take me! Take me! [He is sobbing]

FOURTH SOLDIER. Odysseus! Take me! Take me! [He is sobbing]

A VOICE [in the distance]. Take him!

[PHILOCTETES lies on the ground. His sobs diminish. HERACLES appears]

HERACLES. Philoctetes, rise, rise! Heracles calls you. Be reconciled. Rise! The serpent and the eagle shall unite. Troy shall fall. Glory to Greece. Glory to man!

[*Reënter ODYSSEUS, DEMODOCUS, and the FIRST to SIXTH soldiers. All except DEMODOCUS fall prostrate before HERACLES*]

HERACLES. Rise, Greeks, rise most noble Odysseus. I give you this man, sundered from you so that he might, unknowing, devise your salvation. Take his hand. Honor him. You have mastered him, but now acknowledge him your master. He cowers; he is small and weak; his eyes are filmed with grief and fear; yet he is like a God among you; his thought shall break the citadels. Troy shall fall. And Troy shall be torn out of the earth like a cankered tree.

ODYSSEUS. Humbly, with reverence unutterable, I take back to our thousands, and to Agamemnon the tower above the host, the promise, the certainty, the signature of Zeus.

[*The drum rolls. HERACLES vanishes*]

ODYSSEUS. Soldiers, conduct noble Philoctetes to our ship. The bitter words and the cruel acts are erased. The King of Malis is our commander now. Treat him with fear and veneration.

[*The FIFTH and SIXTH soldiers escort PHILOCTETES out*]

ODYSSEUS. Friends, our mission is accomplished; not without difficulties, not, alas, without bloodshed, but accomplished, I believe, in a manner which must satisfy the supreme command. Demodocus, you are pardoned. Unbind him. I will leave you to the private obscurity of your shame, your petty emotions, your pampered self-concern, and not curb you to the prosecution you deserve. Philoctetes is ours, body and soul. Now let the Trojans land and look for him!

FIRST SOLDIER. The Trojans? But you killed them!

ODYSSEUS. No, my children. Sooner or later you must know. Harden yourselves against the inevitable. These two men were sailors on our craft. [*The CHORUS cries out in grief*] Their lives were demanded of them, two for ten thousand. Alas . . .

FIRST SOLDIER. Odysseus!

DEMODOCUS. You murdered two of our men?

ODYSSEUS. When you failed us, Demodocus, when your conscience became petulant, you forced me to give the terrible command. With the bow in his fist, Philoctetes was intractable. I made an inhuman desert about him. I destroyed his nest. I showed him the face of silence. I broke him.

FIRST SOLDIER. But then, surely, master, you never meant to leave Philoctetes behind, with the Trojans on their way even now! What if he had not cried out for us in the end?

ODYSSEUS. He did cry out for us in the end.

FIRST SOLDIER. I shudder at your cunning, Odysseus. Always in control, even when you are surprised. I will never admit that Philoctetes is an intelligent man, in spite of his inventions.

ODYSSEUS. The intelligent man is not always the clever man. No gloating. Let us be soberly satisfied.

FIRST SOLDIER. Not you, Odysseus. Wherever you go, it seems to us that a shimmer of divinity surrounds you.

ODYSSEUS. Wherever I go, I am knee-high in dung and blood. Come, children, away. Demodocus, are you ready?

DEMODOCUS. Leave me here.

ODYSSEUS. Leave you here?

DEMODOCUS. Yes.

ODYSSEUS. Alone?

DEMODOCUS. Yes.

SECOND SOLDIER. Don't be a fool, Demodocus. Come with us.

THIRD SOLDIER. No one will remind you of anything.

FOURTH SOLDIER. Your place in the field is still your place.

THIRD SOLDIER. Do we speak for you, Odysseus?

ODYSSEUS. You do.

DEMODOCUS. Leave me here. Give me some clothes, a few knives, tools, anything you can or will.

ODYSSEUS. What shall we do, my friends? For myself, I don't care. Let him do as he pleases. Demodocus, we set off when the wind blows into our sails. Come if you wish, stay if you wish. You are too small for my concern. [*He leaves*]

[*The CHORUS speaks with harp*]

FIRST SOLDIER. As a man older than you and more experienced by far, I will address you freely, Demodocus, and call you a coward. You will tell us that you despise the world, that you abhor mankind, that you condemn life—

SECOND SOLDIER. All of which are words suitable to a poet.

FIRST SOLDIER. But in reality you fear the world.

SECOND SOLDIER. Your decision is not strength, but spite; not courage, but shame.

THIRD SOLDIER. And the cheering fire in the house? The open door, the embrace? "You've come back to us," they cry. They take off your cloak, they bathe your feet, they offer you wine and honey, they cry and fuss over you.

FOURTH SOLDIER. Human beings.

SECOND SOLDIER. Others.

poets
writers

realpolitik

α (way)
6 (same)
others
(see 208)

THIRD SOLDIER. Yet yours, your own.

FOURTH SOLDIER. Invisible strings between you and them.

SECOND SOLDIER. Once long ago I quarreled bitterly with my father because he loved my brothers, but me he neglected and even starved; sometimes he beat me; he called me a vagabond. And I left the house; I went to Corinth; I lived alone among strangers. At night I heard the voices next door to mine; during the day I saw people in the street: families, lovers, friends, or polite acquaintances—I envied them all, even the man who patted a dog; and now and then I saw a man alone, like myself, and that man wore the same expression as mine, a studied air of indifference to conceal his despair. He looks around and seems to say, "Me? I am alone only for the moment! I am expecting a happy crowd of friends. Don't worry about me, I beg you." But inside he cries. He goes home and stares at the wall opposite his chair. He eats an apple. He writes a letter. He washes his face. And he sits again and stares. Presently he begins to talk to himself. Then he stops, because he is ashamed. What will he do? He is not tired. What can he do? He paces the floor, lifts a vase from a shelf, places it on a table, he doesn't know why, and sits down again. All he wants now is to see a human being. He knows one at the far end of the city. But this man has a wife and two small children, and it would be a disturbance to knock at his door. What excuse would he have for the visit? He could say, "Excuse me, but I came to borrow the hand-saw you promised me." Perhaps the wife would ask him to come in and share their meal. But if she did, he would reply, "Thank you, but I must hurry, I have an appointment," lest they ridicule him with pity; and he would go home again, and sit, stare, and suffer. Oh Demodocus, believe me, I returned to my birthplace, I kissed the first friend I met in the street; he thought I was mad.

FOURTH SOLDIER. And the war, for that matter, is that so bad after all?

SECOND SOLDIER. No! Better this war all my life, and to lose both my arms, than another month of loneliness.

THIRD SOLDIER. A comrade keeps you warm too.

SECOND SOLDIER. In the heat of battle you hear and see your platoon.

THIRD SOLDIER. At night you roar out a song together.

FOURTH SOLDIER. You share a bottle.

SECOND SOLDIER. A story.

THIRD SOLDIER. A woman.

FOURTH SOLDIER. Show me a good brawler and I'll show you a reliable friend.

SECOND SOLDIER. The worst kind is the man who has no enemies. He has no friends either.

THIRD SOLDIER. Cold blood.

SECOND SOLDIER. Sitting in a corner.

FOURTH SOLDIER. He doesn't know it, but if you left him alone on an island, he would clamor for you, though he acted as if he didn't even know your name.

SECOND SOLDIER. Yes, it's easy to look self-sufficient when you're in good company.

THIRD SOLDIER. For whom will you sing? How will you fare without us who are the listeners? When you sang, we sat still and yet we traveled; we were ourselves and yet we became other men; our lives multiplied; wisdoms not our own became ours. Such was your power over us. But without us, where is your power?

FIRST SOLDIER. Come with us, Demodocus. This is too horrible. You will babble at random and finally lose your language. You will crouch on all fours like a beast. Who knows? You will fornicate with an animal, and beget a monster. Demodocus, live among men. Even hate is better than solitude. The universe is morose, the Gods condemn us; everywhere you look the stars drive insanely in the dense cavern; and we, we few, we poor few, should huddle here and hold each others' hands and say goodbye to the dying, and kiss their lips with a last warmth. But you will die alone, growing vacantly, your head on a stone, and the wild pigs will eat you.

[*Silence*]

FOURTH SOLDIER. He won't say a word.

A VOICE [*in the distance*]. Men! The wind is rising, hurry, hurry!

FIRST SOLDIER. Demodocus. If you came running after us, and caught the rope-ladder while the ship moved away, you might cut a shabby or laughable figure. Many a fool will die rather than cut a shabby or laughable figure. Don't be a fool.

[*The chorus slowly leaves. A long silence follows*]

DEMODOCUS. Erased from the records of the city and the temple, I now become free and innocent, not rising, not sinking, dumb as the laurel, still as a comet, clean as a drop of rain, patient as a rock, peaceful as the dust. I will stop singing, being perfect. I will be reticent. I will listen to the sea's liquid speech, not one hypocrite among all its syllable waves. Philoctetes, I see Troy in torment to the end of time, to the end of time I hear the scurrilous mirth of the conqueror, the unjust and the just; but to me the seagull will report only the fish dancing in the sea, innocently devouring, innocently devoured. Now my peace begins. And to begin it, Demodocus must bury a man.

c/c
Aristo
alone
god or
beast

9c
Grude

we should
is need
others

study

This is my island. It's beautiful. It's always beautiful. I love it.
At night it gets so dark you don't know where you are.
In the day it's hell, but at night, when everything else is asleep, it's heaven.

NEOPTOLEMUS I don't want to stay here.
PHILOKLETES Yes, you do.
I'll leave the bow here with you.
You can use it if you want.
But wait for one night and you won't want to use it.
In the day you'll feel like using it
but at night you won't.
PHILOKLETES loved it here.
Mushrooms grow here at night and you can eat them.

You'll see so many things on this island, you won't want to leave it.
You'll be married to it.
You won't be able to tell where the island begins and you end.
Let me see your hand. It's afraid.
Don't you like it here?

NEOPTOLEMUS What's that smell?
PHILOKLETES Sour mash, camphor, apple rotting, bull blood.
Why are you here?
NEOPTOLEMUS To find Philokletes.
PHILOKLETES Why don't you get out of here.
PHILOKLETES is not here.
Let me tell you honestly, he isn't here.
He's dead, I told you.
But I have a bow and we can share it.

NEOPTOLEMUS I don't want to.
PHILOKLETES Share the bow.
You take it and keep it.
ODYSSEUS Take it.
PHILOKLETES Stop arguing. What are you waiting for? Can you see the bow?
You can only see it from one point on the island.
Who can see it? Whoever can see it can have it.
Who can see it? No one!
One person can see the bow. No?
So I built a house of cards to keep warm and I got inside my house of cards and burnt it.
And it kept me warm for a while.
A good long while.
I found that if I kept talking and kept very still, I'd stay warm.

But then it got very lonely in that house.
But people shouldn't be alone.
And I thought, I have these mushrooms and if I can share them maybe it won't be so lonely.
So I tried to share them with the birds, but no one wanted to share them.
So I threw them into a river. And what did you do?

NEOPTOLEMUS Maybe you can help us.
PHILOKLETES What can I do for you?
ODYSSEUS I was under the impression that Philokletes was here on this island where we left him.
PHILOKLETES No Philokletes here. He's dead.
Very hard to find.
So what did you do while he sat here rotting?
What did you do?

PHILOKLETES Don't just sit there breathing, Neoptolemus. You should be having the time of your life.
PHILOKLETES AS GODDESS
NEOPTOLEMUS Who are you?
PHILOKLETES I am the goddess of the island.
NEOPTOLEMUS This island has no goddess.
What is your name?

PHILOKLETES There are no inhabitants on this island to call me anything.
So I need no name.
NEOPTOLEMUS Doesn't Philokletes live on this island?
PHILOKLETES Who would live on this ridiculous rock?
No human have I ever seen before you arrived.

NEOPTOLEMUS What are you?
PHILOKLETES I am self-born.
NEOPTOLEMUS No husband, no lover?
PHILOKLETES My first-born son was my lover.
Born of me and only me.

NEOPTOLEMUS Why doesn't he appear with you?
PHILOKLETES My lover-son wanted children born of both of us.
These I gave him, but he grew jealous.
Overwhelmed by their ugliness,
he cast them into the underworld
to live as goon squad
One quiet night I called on my youngest son,
my most beautiful, to help me.

and



PHILOKTTES At one time he lay around the island longing for love, but he has removed himself to the fourth quadrant of a distant heaven, abstracted and disengaged. With no one to worship him, Who would worship a man so incomplete? So void of the agent of his will? I mistook your leader, Odysseus, for him. Does he have all his parts?

NEOPTOLEMUS Yes.

PHILOKTTES Check again.

NEOPTOLEMUS Are you sure you haven't seen Philokttes?

PHILOKTTES Do you think I would allow such a stinking thing on my island?

Leave me before I become displeased with you. I have no taste for subergine.

NEOPTOLEMUS And your worshippers?

PHILOKTTES I am self-born and self-perpetuating. I have no need for worshippers.

Now, get the fuck out of here before I castrate you and cover you in garlic sauce.

Subergine, my foot!

MOONSTRUCK

PHILOKTTES One day, soon after I had landed here, a bird came to me.

It said:

"Seeing that you are in such pain and practically obsolete, we share your grief.

We see your broken teeth and the bites on your lips."

I answered:

"It's from eating snakes and opening oysters with my bare teeth."

The bird said:

"We, the creatures of the island, have decided on a future for you. A way out

Would you like to bleed without pain? Drink milk instead of stagnant water.

We see how the phases of the planets disrupt the blood ties in your foot.

A woman holds the ring in her body.

What other animal has a twenty-eight-day cycle? None.

A woman can hold life in her body.

and produce from it not only women but men.

A woman can bleed painlessly.

A woman can produce milk.

I said:

"My son, if you do my bidding, we shall revenge your father's crime, for it was he who invented shameful acts." His father came to make love to me. And from his hiding place, my loyal son reached toward his father and grasped him in his left hand, while holding in his right an enormous sickle. He swung it sharply and cut off the members of his own father.

He threw them into the air, where they splattered in a mist.

Perhaps that's what you smell. I inhaled the bloody mist,

the drops fell to the Earth and released my children from the underworld.

A pygmy phalanx of furies and a race of tall giants shinning in their armor and holding spears in their hands.

I mistook your party for them.

NEOPTOLEMUS We are only men searching for Philokttes.

PHILOKTTES From the foam of the sea where the genitals had been thrown

sprang my daughter. This Philokttes, is he a god?

NEOPTOLEMUS Less than a god, less than a man.

PHILOKTTES What does he look like?

NEOPTOLEMUS He is said to resemble a rotting subergine covered in red garlic sauce.

PHILOKTTES And how did he become this?

NEOPTOLEMUS Years ago, on another island, the suddenly was inflicted upon and began to fester a burn-

ing spot so putrefied that he was abandoned there.

PHILOKTTES By whom?

NEOPTOLEMUS His friends, his army.

PHILOKTTES Blood of his own blood?

NEOPTOLEMUS Spun out of control after years of futile fighting in the Indochina.

PHILOKTTES I had heard about the devastations. Did he displease a god?

NEOPTOLEMUS A goddess, Chryse.

PHILOKTTES My daughter. Yeah, well, she is a sort of a bitch.

How was she displeased?

NEOPTOLEMUS I thought you could tell me. What about your first son?

I see you changing in your suffering.
Take your knife to the tundra, and plant
I believe you are soon to become a woman.
"Me?" I said, "I beg your pardon, honey?"
I don't think so.
Several weeks later I began menstruating.

PRAYER FRAGMENT

PHILOKETES Shall we pray?
ODYSSEUS Don't say it.
NEOPTOLEMUS Say it.

PHILOKETES Every day I wake up and say it.
It used to take me all day to spit out
each and every one of the twenty thousand
bloody dominoes into the sky.
But I learned.

NEOPTOLEMUS Say it.

ODYSSEUS Don't say it.

PHILOKETES First I dance around on my bad
foot a little bit like this.
It sends a fibrillating spinal tap of bloodshot
straight through my tongue.

ODYSSEUS Don't say it.

PHILOKETES You know every word.

NEOPTOLEMUS Listen to what the cripple creek
fairly say.

PHILOKETES And he say:

"I am the instrument of God the Creator.
To try and succeed where he failed.
I can see everything.

What I can see, I can touch.

What I cannot touch, I can see.

What I cannot see, I can imagine.

What I can imagine is mine to keep.

What I cannot imagine is not mine

and will crush me eventually."

So I crush all thought about what I cannot imagine.

And it say:

"I made you out of nothing.
And now you are nothing.
I made you and I can unmake you.
I can make you into something else.
I can make something beautiful
and something ugly.
I will crush you. I will eat you.

And in discovering that, you will rejoice at your
good fortune to be made by me as anything
I will want to make you.

And after I eat you, I will spit you out
upon the waves.

For the fish and lowest of animals to eat.

Because you are the lowest of all animals.
I made you that way.

Lower than low, darker than dark.
Blacker than black.

I made you that way to give glory to me.
And you will give glory to me even in your lowest
form of misery because I made you that way.

And you will rejoice in it because you have
no other choice.

And you will be happy with what I have done
because I am the Lord your Creator.

And I made you to suffer and worship me in joy.
If I give you a brain full of black blood,
you will rejoice and thank me for it.

If I give you a three-headed son,
you will jump for joy.

If I give you testicles of salt, you will rejoice.

If I rain thalldomide on your people,
you will rejoice and thank me.

If I give you a cockucking son who will bear
no issue and be the end of your family's line,
you will rejoice in it

and thank me for what I have given you.

If I burn your city, you will rejoice.

If I send you to burn a city, you will also rejoice.

If I cause you to build a great army,
you will rejoice.

If I cause your teeth to be ripped from the roots
and run riot over the countryside,
you will rejoice.

This is what I have given unto you, Philoketes.
And you will give me all your joy when you thank
me for it.

You will dance for me on one foot if necessary.

You will eat blood cakes if necessary.

You will rape your sister if necessary.

You will swallow your own flesh if necessary.

because that is how I have made you.

If I give you strength, you will cherish it.

If I give you weakness, you will cherish it.

If I give you a stump for a face,
you will rejoice in it.

For it is what I gave you.

You will find beauty in it.
For there is beauty in the center of all ugliness.
Remember that I am in everything.
Even in the ugliest thing,
which is what I made you.

And I made you to discover that.

And in discovering that, you will rejoice at your
good fortune to be made by me as anything
I will want to make you.

Big
God
GK

And when you beg me for an answer,
I will say, what are you looking at?
And if I give you a rhino clit bitch for a wife,
you will rejoice

and breed seven rhino daughters in honor of me.
That is what the God says to me.

And if I say no, he will slap me down again until
I cry uncle and enjoy the beauty of my suffering.

That's how I have survived ten years
in a club-footed memory dance.

Can you dig all that?
ODYSSEUS I'm afraid I don't know that one.

PHILOKTTES Yes, you do.
You recite it over every body of every
beautiful boy you bury.

You're here because you couldn't heave up
another word to save your life.

NEOPTOLEMUS You couldn't chuck another spear
to save your life.

PHILOKTTES A battalion of hydra-headed
epileptics couldn't have stopped you
from coming back for the bow.

Am I right or am I wrong?
ODYSSEUS Wrong.

PHILOKTTES Am I right or am I wrong?
They sure was right when they said my brains was
in my feet. So feast on the meal
I've prepared for you.

And give the bow back to Troy and win the battle
for the empire.
Pic the riches high,
and when you're done with that,
prepare the next pill.

Because the thought that brought you here
demands ten times ten skyscrapers full.

NEOPTOLEMUS Full of what?

PHILOKTTES Full of beautiful boys in screaming
sad sacks.

Oh, you pretty things.
Then, and only then, will the God be satisfied.
For I am the instrument of the God above.

And we'll eat together we've prepared together.
And it will taste good.
Then we'll spit it out and start all over again.

NEOPTOLEMUS Oh, you pretty things.
PHILOKTTES All to glory our own stupid selves.
Have another blood and honey sandwich.
ODYSSEUS

and contemplate your future under the boot
AND TROY?

PHILOKTTES And Troy?
ODYSSEUS Still undefeated.

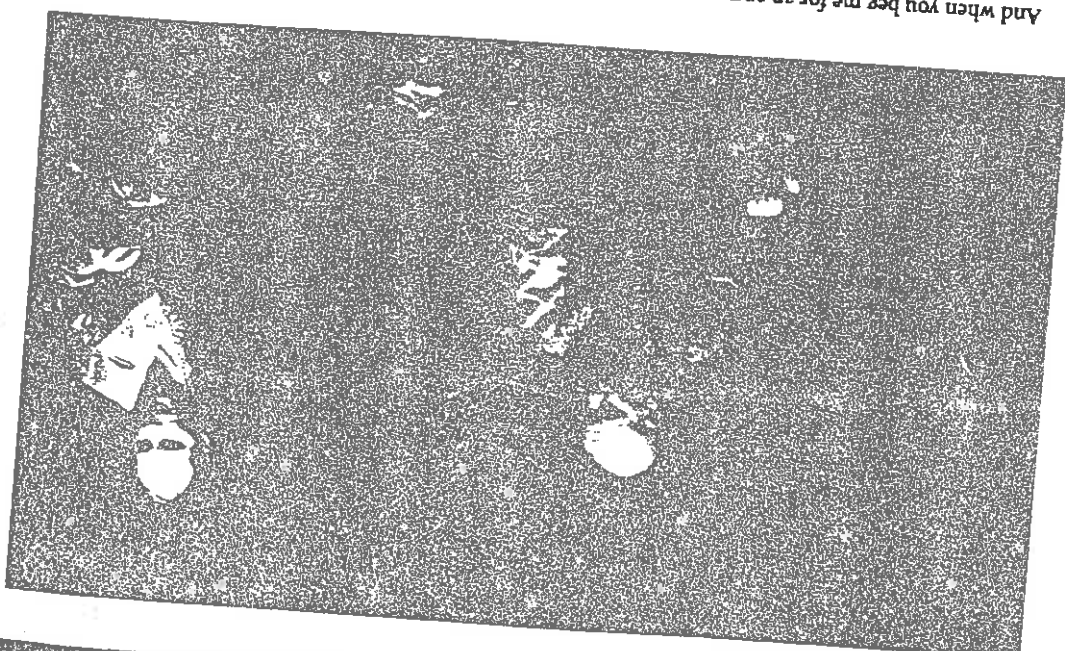
PHILOKTTES Just can't burn that mother down,
can you? Haven't you fought hard enough?

ODYSSEUS It is said the city will burn seven times
until it will be ash.

PHILOKTTES I burned seven times myself
and I am ash.

ODYSSEUS Still defeated.
PHILOKTTES You've come so far, covered so little
ground.

ODYSSEUS And really, what does ash feel like?



PHILOCTETES The sting of the Ishmaelite.

ODYSSEUS Angel dust?

PHILOCTETES Fuck you and the horse you rode in on.

Why have you come back?

It's said that you've come back here to regain your honor, your dignity,

to be worthy of the victory over Troy.

To make it slightly less hollow.

To make some sense of your obsessive attempts to penetrate her interior.

To find your balls again.

Is that really you?

ODYSSEUS Yes, it's me.

Odysseus, the evil one, trickster, seducer, the perverted one, baby killer, betrayer.

PHILOCTETES Always in search of something lower than yourself.

Look at me and tell me if you've found it.

ODYSSEUS If I swallow my pride, why can't you?

PHILOCTETES Not only have I swallowed my pride but I am swallowed by it.

Imagine that.

ODYSSEUS That sounds like fun. What were you doing on the temple grounds, anyway?

PHILOCTETES Same thing you were. Looking for a warehouse, taking a fucking walk.

PHILOCTETES You must have done something that would have caused this foot to fester.

PHILOCTETES It could have been any number of things.

Most of which you yourself have done.

ODYSSEUS It's hideous here. So muggy. The air is like chocolate.

How did you find this horrible hotel?

We left you on the other side of the island.

PHILOCTETES This was more secluded.

My foot prefers it. More sugar water?

PHILOCTETES So, anyway, you're back because no matter how hard you try you just can't turn Troy into a disco inferno.

It's no surprise to me.

ODYSSEUS And that's why we've come back, and you know it.

PHILOCTETES Oh, now I know it, do I?

I seem to know everything.

Unfortunately, the information you want is stuck in my throat and nothing can retrieve it.

And where did you get that aide-de-camp?

ODYSSEUS What did he tell you?

PHILOCTETES Nothing.

but he is such a fag.

ODYSSEUS He is not.

PHILOCTETES Did you ask him?

ODYSSEUS No.

PHILOCTETES Then he never told you.

ODYSSEUS What does that have to do with anything?

PHILOCTETES Nothing. I just thought I'd notice it.

ODYSSEUS What are you reading?

PHILOCTETES "An Intimate History of Nothingness."

ODYSSEUS Never heard of it.

PHILOCTETES Neither had I.

Have another margarita.

ODYSSEUS No, thanks.

PHILOCTETES Neoptolemus?

NEOPTOLEMUS No, thanks.

PHILOCTETES Who's going to know?

I soak my leg in it sometimes.

Then they kicked me out of the cripple wing because I was making too much trouble.

Can you imagine? Me, a war hero, making trouble.

They said I was beyond crippled,

and I wasn't going to stay in the nut wing so they put me here in this hotel, alone.

The doctor visits once a week.

We have a few drinks together and he stumbles home.

How are things in the Panygon, Odysseus?

NEOPTOLEMUS Why is it so hot in here?

ODYSSEUS Neoptolemus, stay away from this impure, evil-smelling, unclean Philoكتetes.

Upon whom god has inflicted curse and malediction,

contempt and abasement, infamy, etc,

and degradation

as upon no other person.

NEOPTOLEMUS Don't take it to heart, Philoكتetes.

PHILOKTTES Nobody did I take it to be any
it became my heart, pumping a murdering self-
contempt through every vein in my brain.
More noxious than the vinaigrette
that eats my body.

ODYSSEUS And what is eating your body? Did they
ever find out?

PHILOKTTES (sarcastically) Oh, and what is
eating your body? Did they ever find out?

If they had I wouldn't be here and neither would
you.

We'd probably both be dead half a mile outside of
Troy. Thank you for bringing the flowers.

ODYSSEUS I thought you were dead.
PHILOKTTES I thought you were dead.

PHILOKTTES Which isn't to say you wished I was
dead.

Which isn't to say that I'm not halfway there.
Be that as it may, the whores here can't put up
with me, either. I don't blame them.

PHILOKTTES I just can't get it up no more
Cry like a woman for what you couldn't get like a
man.

PHILOKTTES (sighs, Neopolemus?)

NEOPTOLEMUS Shut the fuck up.

PHILOKTTES Nastly little grunge-bunny.

ODYSSEUS Who's that?

PHILOKTTES The maid.

As she spied my groaning groin,
her eyes engulfed me in a Gordian knot.

But never mind, all my troubles, lord, will soon
be over.

Now, get out of my room before I call the front
desk.

I've had enough and so, I'm sure, have you.

ODYSSEUS Do we have a deal?

PHILOKTTES No deal.

NEOPTOLEMUS We'll come back again tomorrow.

PHILOKTTES Please don't.

By the way, Odysseus, if our paths cross again,
if we happen to see each other,

though I doubt we would recognize one another,
as we are now so well-hidden

by our individual sicknesses.

I must warn you to stay away from me,
as I from you.

For you and I may very well be the
impure, evil-smelling, unclean people

upon whom god has inflicted curse and
malediction.

contempt and abasement, infamy, etc.

as upon no other people.

So if you see me, walk on by.

ODYSSEUS Why do you include me in your
degradation?

PHILOKTTES Would you like another drink?

We may be discovered and revealed if we are seen
too close together. You do understand?

ODYSSEUS Why do you include me?

PHILOKTTES Because you're the snake that bit me
and sent me here.

ODYSSEUS Spare me the moaning lecture.

It's a bunch of bullshit.

PHILOKTTES And you wear it well.

The shit-faced smile smeared all over your face.

ODYSSEUS Spare me the lecture.

PHILOKTTES Who in that body have failed.

I am the one who can keep you a failure
and I'm the one who can take you out of it.

I am the one.

Me in this body.

Here.

What could you possibly want from me?

You'd eat your own shit to succeed.

ODYSSEUS Me in this body who would eat my own
children,

sleep with my mother, rape my sister,
kill my father, give birth to my own brother,

destroy my own family to preserve
what's left of it.

Bar self-looking

(Slams phone down) Why don't we meet tomorrow for lunch by the pool for round two? Now, get out of my room. Good night.

PHILOKTETES DANCES

PHILOKTETES is dancing.

ODYSSEUS Stop, please.

NEOPTOLEMUS Don't mind him. He's a practitioner of Yogic flying.

ODYSSEUS I won't have that pagan sorcery in my presence.

NEOPTOLEMUS It's nothing. He rarely gets a centimeter off the ground.

ODYSSEUS Keep the windows closed in case he gets any higher, and tie his foot to a string.

I don't want him to escape. See that he gets all the honey sandwiches he wants.

That's enough.

PHILOKTETES stops dancing.

PHILOKTETES Don't you like it?

ODYSSEUS No, dear.

PHILOKTETES Oh, yes, dear. After I was bitten, my first mistake was learning to crawl on one knee.

I thought it was impossible, but I did learn.

My second mistake was learning to dance on one foot.

I thought it was impossible, but I did learn.

ODYSSEUS What does it represent?

PHILOKTETES It's an interpretation of a hungry fly after a meal of blood.

ODYSSEUS Oh, no, dear.

PHILOKTETES Oh, yes, dear.

NEOPTOLEMUS It isn't that, really, is it?

PHILOKTETES Yes, it is.

ODYSSEUS Where do you get such perversions?

PHILOKTETES When I see my reflection in your eyes.

ODYSSEUS Is that really what you see?

PHILOKTETES Oh, yes. Poor thing.

What a horrible world you must live in.

ODYSSEUS You live in it, too.

PHILOKTETES I don't live in it, I live under it.

Go figure. Imagine that.

If that's what I have to do. And what will you do to get off this island?

PHILOKTETES None of the above.

If I had done any of those things, I could understand what happened to me.

Who bit me? What bit me?

ODYSSEUS No answer.

PHILOKTETES Who left me here?

And why did you leave me here?

ODYSSEUS I was afraid.

PHILOKTETES How brave of you to admit it.

How courageous of you to wait so long to tell me.

ODYSSEUS You were so ugly.

And you wouldn't stop screaming.

PHILOKTETES Why have you come back then?

ODYSSEUS Because I'm afraid.

PHILOKTETES Afraid the fuck of what?

ODYSSEUS Of losing. (Not knowing what you've learned being here)

PHILOKTETES And what the hell could you use that knowledge for?

It's not exactly an equation for a new bomb.

ODYSSEUS And what have you learned being here?

PHILOKTETES I haven't learned anything except that every word that comes

out of your mouth is a lie.

I'd love to share the pain with you but it's not possible.

You see, I've become very greedy with it.

What have you learned since you left me here?

ODYSSEUS That I am your only salvation

And what have you learned since you've been here?

PHILOKTETES That I am my only salvation

By the way, I'm also your only salvation.

ODYSSEUS Then if we can persuade each other.

PHILOKTETES Victory to the victim.

The vengeance of the crucified.

ODYSSEUS Get off your cross.

PHILOKTETES If you put away your hammer and nails.

(Into telephone) Hello, I'd like to order two orders of Mitsu pork, five egg rolls,

and a one-ton tomato. You know what room!

ODYSSEUS Don't complain. You could have been born a hunchback.

PHILOKLETES Every day I pray to the gods to make me into water.

ODYSSEUS The gods got us into this, but I doubt they can get us out.

PHILOKLETES Hera, make me into water. But I am mostly water already, aren't I?

ODYSSEUS Red water.

PHILOKLETES Jesus, make me into clear water. Can't you see I'm covered in white powder.

ODYSSEUS Yes, a toppled minaret, armless and close to starvation, lost in a sea of ventriloquy.

PHILOKLETES the Liburni at the end of the tunnel. I don't even speak my own language and I don't know how I am or ever was.

ODYSSEUS Sometimes it's better not to know who you are.

I don't know who you are either but there is no question as to what you aren't.

PHILOKLETES Then what am I? ODYSSEUS Whatever I am, you are not, and whatever you aren't, I am.

PHILOKLETES That being so, would you kill me if I asked you to?

ODYSSEUS No.

PHILOKLETES Why? Would you like to kill me?

ODYSSEUS Yes.

PHILOKLETES Then why don't you?

ODYSSEUS Your request somehow muffles the hum of it.

PHILOKLETES Well, then, wait and other circumstances, I couldn't.

PHILOKLETES I won't mind. I won't mind.

I dare you. My life is worth more to you than it is to me.
I hate myself more than I hate you.
I am the vomit of my former error.

ODYSSEUS What a horrible world you must live in if you have to ask someone to kill you.
Can't you do it yourself?

PHILOCTETES The pleasure of having you do it is too hard to resist.
To watch the thinking war machine as it churns through its motions.
We Greeks are so beautiful when we kill.

ODYSSEUS, make me into clear water.
That's right, watch me cry like a woman for what I couldn't face like a man.

Poor things. What a horrible world you must live in.

ODYSSEUS I don't live in the world, either. I also live under it.

Very close to where you live. We're neighbors.

PHILOCTETES Fat chance.

ODYSSEUS I walk by your house every day. Somewhere near the bottom of the world. It's left a scar on my brain that can't be erased.

PHILOCTETES How could you live on the bottom of the world?
I've never seen you down here.

ODYSSEUS You don't notice me, but I'm here.

PHILOCTETES You're digging around in my heart, tricking me.

ODYSSEUS Give me the bow and I'll kill you.

PHILOCTETES Kill me and I'll give you the bow.

ODYSSEUS No.

PHILOCTETES Neoptolemus, you do it.

NEOPTOLEMUS Not so fast. How will I do it?

PHILOCTETES Whatever way you want.

NEOPTOLEMUS But why?

PHILOCTETES Why not?

One quiet night I had a dream.

I dreamed I could fly.

We Malians are always accused of flying.

But I was flying in my dream.

As I flew through the temple of Chryse.

I was a pigbal, spitting blood and wine, dreaming of Troy.

Floating over the bones of the lovely boys who followed me into failure.

I was as they saw me. I woke up.

Since then when I look in the mirror I can't see myself as anything else but that.

NEOPTOLEMUS What an ugly dream.

PHILOCTETES It's more than a dream, and so as I can't see myself as anything else.

I'd rather not see myself at all.

ODYSSEUS Then don't look.

PHILOCTETES Living is looking and I don't want to look anymore.

What do you see?

ODYSSEUS I can't see myself at all.

PHILOCTETES You must see something. Take off your mask.

ODYSSEUS I'm not wearing a mask.

PHILOCTETES Show me the mind in the middle of the mask.

ODYSSEUS No, nothing at all. Blank.

PHILOCTETES What do you see when you look at me?

ODYSSEUS Certainly not a pigbal.

PHILOCTETES Yes, you do. Will you do it?

ODYSSEUS Maybe.

PHILOCTETES Kill the pigbal. Do this in memory of me.

It's the last thing on earth anyone would want to be.

NEOPTOLEMUS Who made you?

PHILOCTETES The gods made me.

NEOPTOLEMUS They made you as a pigbal?

PHILOCTETES No, not originally, but somehow I was transformed.

NEOPTOLEMUS How?

PHILOCTETES Ask Odysseus.

ODYSSEUS Were you transformed, or did you do it yourself?

NEOPTOLEMUS Can't you transform yourself back to your original form?

PHILOKTTES I don't think so. I don't have the energy.

If you kill me, hopefully I will revert.

ODYSSEUS And live in hell, like the oracle says.

PHILOKTTES That oracle was written by some horny, monkey-fucking monk

and you know it.

ODYSSEUS We know it. But I'd rather live in hell as myself than in heaven as a pigbat.

NEOPTOLEMUS I didn't think they were allowed in heaven.

PHILOKTTES Haven't you gotten it yet, you little sagoit?

There is no heaven.

NEOPTOLEMUS You don't believe that.

Can you worship God and be a pigbat at the same time?

PHILOKTTES I worship myself now.

ODYSSEUS Then you are in hell already.

PHILOKTTES Correct. Can you tell me why?

ODYSSEUS Yes, anyone who lives in hell worships himself. That's why he's there.

PHILOKTTES And where are you?

ODYSSEUS Dead center.

PHILOKTTES Will you do it, Neoptolemus?

NEOPTOLEMUS No.

PHILOKTTES Odysseus?

ODYSSEUS Next Friday.

PHILOKTTES Could you make that Thursday?

ODYSSEUS All right.

PHILOKTTES You never answered my question. What am I?

ODYSSEUS I'll tell you on Thursday.

THE FIRST DAY

PHILOKTTES The first day on this island, I sat rotting on a rock.

Minute after minute, the day and I suffered together.

Making secret plots to escape the next minute. I thought it was unendurable

but unfortunately I discovered that it was endurable.

It was endurable unfortunately.

I thought I would die of it

but I discovered I would die of it

and I had suffered completely the suffering

required of me.

Till I had paid the bill

completely.

So I endured completely

One day I came upon a bird.

The very bird who had offered me the qualities

of a woman to ease my pain.

She was weeping.

I asked her why she was weeping.

I weep because I am barren.

My husband, my friends have left me.

I, who proclaimed the glory of woman,

I bleed but bear no children,

and I have become useless to my family.

I can create nothing, so I am nothing.

How will I endure my uselessness?

My wound is incurable, yet I thought

that if I made light of it I could bear it.

I used to love my beautiful little body,

my shape, mine and only mine.

But now it's mine and only mine and I hate it.

It's mine and I don't want it.

Even my shame is useless.

I said:

Rejoice, oh you barren,

You that do not bear children

break forth and shout.

You who do not give birth.

For the children of the desolate one are many.

surpassing those of her that has a husband.

Have no fear because you are put to shame.

Do not stand in awe because you were reproached.

For you shall forget your old confusion and shall

not remember the reproach

of your widowed state (Isaiah 54).

Your value is not that you can create,

but that you were created.

Even our adversities will be compelled to

understand in spite of themselves.

We sang, we bled together awhile.

She flew away.

I later found her body in a nest she'd made of

barbed wire.

I bled again.

I used to love my beautiful little body,

my smell, my skin, mine and only mine.

If no one else will love it then I will love it

because it's mine and only mine.

My skin, my smell, my blood, my body.

Mine and only mine because it's mine and it's

beautiful

because it can endure even its own ugliness.
Mind and only mind.
Mine by right of conquest.

WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?

ODYSSEUS Where have you been?

PHILOKETES Taking a shit, dear one.

ODYSSEUS Oh, no, dear.

PHILOKETES Oh, yes, dear. First I shit in the

ocean, then I shit on the altar

to the crucified, then I shit in the temple.

then I shit on words that tell me nothing.

That's where I've been.

ODYSSEUS One quiet night, we all found ourselves

in the same restaurant.

Take your pick from the menu.

One appetizer may be slightly better than another,

but all the food is rotten.

PHILOKETES Our common brutal biology.

ODYSSEUS Can you dig that?

PHILOKETES What about me?

ODYSSEUS God cannot return the skin that man

has torn asunder.

PHILOKETES Winners always lose, all losers know

that.

ODYSSEUS I cried because I had no shoes until I

met a man who had no feet.

PHILOKETES And that man cried because he had

no feet

until he met a man who had no balls.

ODYSSEUS The horrors of a half-known life.

PHILOKETES In the underworld.

Where the night comes before the day.

The wound before the bite.

ODYSSEUS I'll leave it smashed and broken and

starving.

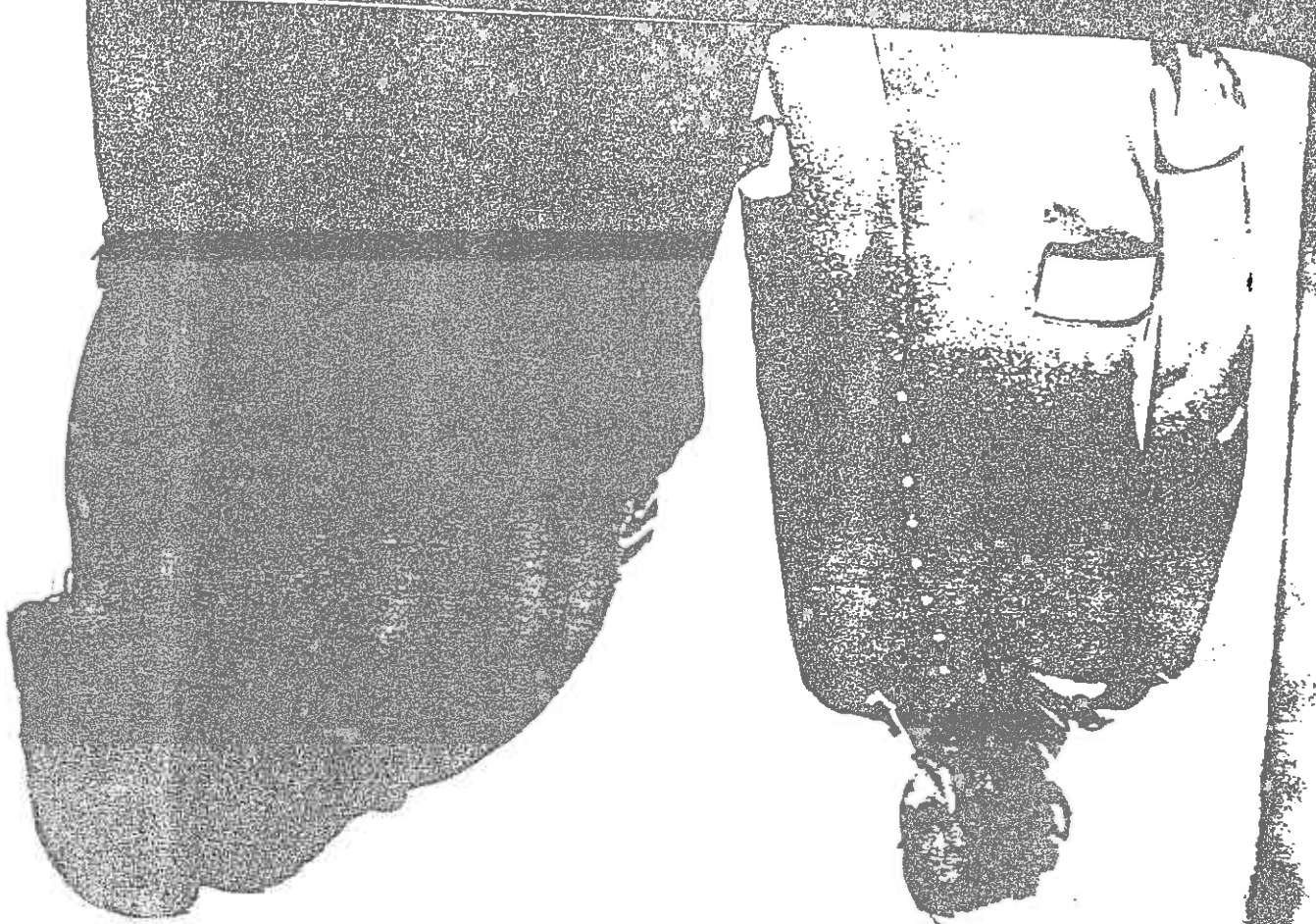
Spasmodically knocking at your door for a cookie

PHILOKETES What would you know?

ODYSSEUS We all know. We, the ones who are left

to carry around bowls of ashes.

It's a fixation.



PHILOKTTES A meditation on an empty moon
but lemon blossoms still bloom.

ODYSSEUS The ones who clean up the shit and the
vomit of the ones who went before. My stomach
is shivering.

PHILOKTTES A great shudder has gone through
the family.
Finally, at last. A filthy, poison breath breathed
among us.

Under the soles of our feet
Into our toenails, even. But orange blossoms
still bloom.

ODYSSEUS It lited us here. A blubbering, choking
sardonic
its nose all twisted around in an empty arthill but
orange blossoms still bloom.

PHILOKTTES What an insulting insult.

ODYSSEUS No one has to know.

PHILOKTTES Everyone has to know by now.

ODYSSEUS And how.

PHILOKTTES Everyone has to know by now.
The underworld forever stays
but orange blossoms still bloom under the
underworld.

SWEETNESS

PHILOKTTES Sweet Neoptolemus,
I want you to tell me...

NEOPTOLEMUS No, you tell me.

PHILOKTTES What?

NEOPTOLEMUS Tell me, what god's asshole have
you climbed out of

to have ended up in this toilet?

Who excreted you, who vomited you up?

What jekyll-headed god's spleen hurled you into
my orbit?

What laghag goddess gave birth to you
and why?

PHILOKTTES What neurotic soul dreamed you
into my galaxy of pain?

NEOPTOLEMUS Why, and what meaning do you
have?

Or have you given birth to yourself?

Or have you come here on your own power?

PHILOKTTES And what god's fart blew you here
to disturb my peace and quiet?

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Or have you come here on your own power?

PHILOKTTES And what god's fart blew you here
to disturb my peace and quiet?

To interrupt my pain?
Who could have done it?

NEOPTOLEMUS What sarty ejaculated you into
my sphere?
What impotent ant spit you out in a fit of disgust?

PHILOKTTES Who could have done it?
NEOPTOLEMUS What dying man exhaled you?
What reeking hyena bitch rejected you?
What is this thing in front of us?
What cell mutated you into existence?
Who or what could have done it?

PHILOKTTES And why?
NEOPTOLEMUS If I could force myself into your
head with a shovel and figure it out

PHILOKTTES If I could force myself out of my
head, I would.

NEOPTOLEMUS And why do we have to sit here
and breathe his stink day after day?

PHILOKTTES The night air has gotten to you.
You've begun to stink, yourself.

Get out of the sun.
You're becoming rancid, so manly and aggressive.

NEOPTOLEMUS Have another scotch and shut up.

PHILOKTTES Empty-headed, dizzy, delirious.
I don't recognize you.
Your sweet little body,
It's afraid, shivering, preoccupied, incoherent.

NEOPTOLEMUS Full of bull's breath,
a pig-necked daddy pulsing with adrenaline.

PHILOKTTES And ready to kill.

Your diaper has fallen off.

How nice to know you don't need it anymore.

You're a body that could go far,
especially dressed the way you are.

He's beginning to see the picture now.
NEOPTOLEMUS Aren't you dead yet?

PHILOKTTES What?

NEOPTOLEMUS I said, aren't you fucking dead yet?

PHILOKTTES No.

NEOPTOLEMUS Then pick up your brain and
answer me.

PHILOKTTES (to ODYSSEUS) Why did you bring
him here?

As if his sweetness could seduce me
while your logic failed.

What unworthy calamity have you brought into
my presence?

ODYSSEUS The son of his dead father.

As if his pappy could have known he'd produce a fruit so bitter, so sweet.

He would have had you umbilically strangulated.

PHILOKETES Smothered you in your own swaddling clothes.

NEOPTOLEMUS Then curse the egg that hatched me. The snake that bit you.

PHILOKETES I was hoping for some sweet logic to goze out of you.

PHILOKETES But your gambrel is spreading in the moonlight. Intoxicated, lustous, asphyxiating, amnestic. It's oozed its name into the snow.

ODYSSEUS It's your pathological bloody brotherhood of cells united in hatred against all corners that's infected us.

PHILOKETES Oh, no, dear, you brought it with you.

He's beginning to get the picture now.

I was hoping for some sweet logic to ooze out of you.

Some thought to rescue me.

But, alas, the putrefaction continues.

He's beginning to get the picture.

PHILOKETES I'll tell you what I see.

Correct me if I'm wrong.

I see a body and two idiots talking to it.

Trying to get answers out of it.

They believe it's alive and can tell them something.

The body knows the answer, but the other two don't know the question.

So they rant and hurl insults at it.

One is young, one is old, and one is dead.

They're a triangle, visible and indivisible.

All are detached.

But the body says nothing so they fall in the blanks.

Convinced that their enemy is the dead body.

Instead of screaming at each other, they scream at the body.

Instead of insulting each other, they insult the body.

They sit and wait for it to speak.

As if the dead keep on talking.

A family of birds sits on a branch and rolls their eyes.

NEOPTOLEMUS Does it have anything to do with love?

PHILOKETES Yes, can you see it?

ODYSSEUS What is this bullshit?

Change the picture.

NEOPTOLEMUS No, leave it. I want to see it.

I can see my body.

PHILOKETES You are your body and you can see it.

ODYSSEUS I am not my body.

PHILOKETES You are your body and if you watch long enough, I will bury you.

NEOPTOLEMUS Does it have anything to do with love?

PHILOKETES I would hope so.

But now the picture changes.

I see two cadavers screaming at each other.

NEOPTOLEMUS While a breathing man sips heroin.

PHILOKETES Yes, can you see it?

ODYSSEUS What is this bullshit?

Change the picture.

NEOPTOLEMUS No, leave it. I want to see it.

I can see my body.

PHILOKETES You are your body and you can see it.

ODYSSEUS I am not my body.

PHILOKETES You are your body and if you watch long enough, I will bury you.

NEOPTOLEMUS Does it have anything to do with love?

PHILOKETES Look at it.

ODYSSEUS What hideous thing have you done?

What false god have you prayed to?

Who's wife have you slept with?

What ideology have you rejected?

NEOPTOLEMUS More heroin?

ODYSSEUS What god have you spurned?

Answer me.

PHILOKETES Sure.

ODYSSEUS Where's that aspirin?

I want you to recite from beginning to end so we can hear what you've done.

to bring this down upon us.

What reason have you performed?

What version of what perversion?

NEOPTOLEMUS Does it have anything to do with love?

ODYSSEUS Stop asking me that.

PHILOKETES You're drooling, what can satisfy you?

Would it satisfy you if I told you I killed John Lennon or JFK?

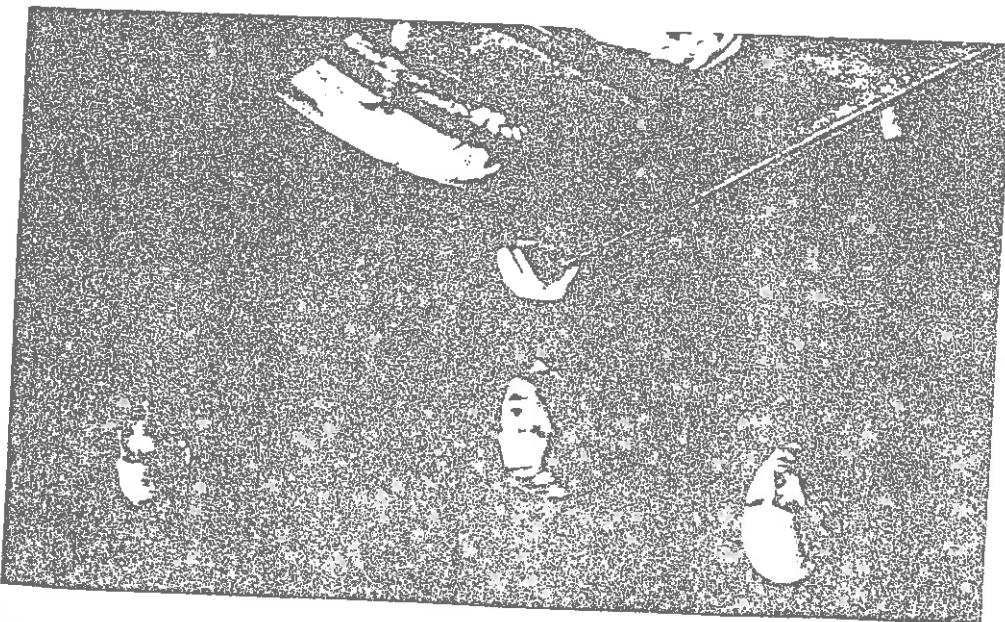
Smothered Judy Garland or Bessie Smith?

What answer will ease your pain?

NEOPTOLEMUS Would you like an aspirin?

ODYSSEUS What law did you break?

NEOPTOLEMUS Does anyone have an aspirin?



PHILOKTTES We were on our way to beat the fuckin' shit out of the Trojans.

ODYSSEUS Who sent us?

PHILOKTTES The Nation of Haters sent the Army ✓

of Lovers because they thought they could never be defeated.

ODYSSEUS Skip that question.

What were your orders?

PHILOKTTES To ram my battalion into their

battalion.

To destroy their sweetness.

ODYSSEUS What were you?

PHILOKTTES Like you, a general.

ODYSSEUS Tell me about the snake.

PHILOKTTES Give me a drink.

NEOPTOLEMUS Bartender.

ODYSSEUS No.

PHILOKTTES I thirst.

ODYSSEUS For what?

NEOPTOLEMUS Does it have anything to do with love?

PHILOKTTES For sweetness.

ODYSSEUS The snake. Tell us about the snake.

PHILOKTTES On the temple ground.

ODYSSEUS Why did you go there?

PHILOKTTES I didn't know it was the temple.

ODYSSEUS Hold the room still, will you? What law did you break?

PHILOKTTES There is no law here on this island. And where there is no law there is no

transgression.

And leave your bags of logic and order packed. They don't mean a thing here in the vicinity of

my putrid leg.

So leave the bags packed.

And get your sweating eye away from me.

ODYSSEUS What are you looking at?

NEOPTOLEMUS His leg.

ODYSSEUS Start at the beginning.

PHILOKTTES And I am blessed among women.

ODYSSEUS How did you get here?

PHILOKTTES You brought me here.

ODYSSEUS Why?

PHILOKTTES My leg, the smell, the pain, the howl. My toe, my fool, my leg, my legacy.

ODYSSEUS What happened to your leg?

NEOPTOLEMUS Bitten by a snake.

ODYSSEUS Why?

PHILOKTTES Don't know.

ODYSSEUS Yes, you do.

NEOPTOLEMUS Where?

PHILOKTTES The Island of Chryse.

ODYSSEUS What were you doing there?

PHILOCTETES The same god that incubated the
 thought to leave me here.
 Why did you come back?
 NEOPTOLEMUS There was no god that told him
 to come back
 because he doesn't believe in gods.
 PHILOCTETES You came back because you want
 me to wipe the disgrace off your face.
 ODYSSEUS Am I bleeding?
 PHILOCTETES My foot may be rotting but you are
 the rot
 We're a triangle, invisible and indivisible,
 one nation under an absent god,
 and you broke the triangle
 and now you've come to put it back together.
 I'm the thinking, missing link
 you've been searching for these ten years.
 So put the pieces of the cadaver together again if
 you can.
 Your cardboard box of logic,
 it's melting away,
 it's abandoned you.
 NEOPTOLEMUS You're bleeding, Odysseus,
 you've become barren, yellow-bellied,
 party-wasted.
 PHILOCTETES Desperately searching for an enemy.
 NEOPTOLEMUS Does it have anything to do
 with love?
 PHILOCTETES Desperately searching for an enemy.
 Somebody tell me please!
 with love?
 PHILOCTETES What can I do for you? Poor thing.
 But rejoice, oh you barren.
 You who do not bear fruit.
 You who have given up because
 they can't figure it out no more.
 Have no fear because you are put to shame.
 For you shall forget your old confusion and shall
 not remember the reproach
 of your widowed state.
 Even I will be compelled to understand in spite of
 myself.
 NEOPTOLEMUS Does it have anything to do
 with love?
 Will somebody please tell me!
 PHILOCTETES Shut him up.
 ODYSSEUS I would hope so
 NEOPTOLEMUS Who's that sitting there?

Admitt
 Gay desire
 4 ph.

ODYSSEUS Yes, you did.
 Were you alone?
 PHILOCTETES Yes.
 ODYSSEUS No, you weren't.
 PHILOCTETES A walk in the dark.
 ODYSSEUS What were you doing there?
 PHILOCTETES We were searching for the moisture,
 the sweetness in the night air.
 NEOPTOLEMUS All animals seek it.
 ODYSSEUS And this sweetness, what was it in the
 form of?
 PHILOCTETES It was in the form of sweetness.
 ODYSSEUS You heard me. What was it in the form of?
 PHILOCTETES In the form of sweetness.
 NEOPTOLEMUS It has only one form. You know
 that.
 ODYSSEUS Why were you and only you bitten by
 the snake?
 PHILOCTETES It was also searching for sweetness.
 All animals seek it.
 ODYSSEUS I was there. Why wasn't I bitten?
 PHILOCTETES I was the sweetest.
 NEOPTOLEMUS Leave the body alone. Can't you
 see it's dead?
 ODYSSEUS It is not dead and I won't leave it alone.
 Why am I bleeding?
 NEOPTOLEMUS Have another drink.
 ODYSSEUS Say it, I transgressed and was punished.
 And brought defeat and shame to my people.
 PHILOCTETES No.
 ODYSSEUS Say it.
 PHILOCTETES (Laughing) I transgressed and was
 punished.
 and brought defeat and shame to my people.
 ODYSSEUS And because of that I forced you to
 suffer ten years of backbreaking failure.
 Backbreaking, say it.
 PHILOCTETES No.
 ODYSSEUS What god did you offend?

PHILOKTTES A virgin man on the verge of

perplexed,

Loveless and loveless

Moving backwards from the light

and forward into the darkness.

Shall we force a trace on ourselves?

Consume and consume ourselves?

Float like heroin

on the tip of the needle?

Mc blessed among women,

you damned among men.

ODYSSEUS Sink the needle and put my logic out of

its misery

PHILOKTTES It's as naked as a fetus in its sixth

week

It can't stand up on its own legs.

NEOPTOLEMUS Give it a break and put it back into

the womb

PHILOKTTES I gave it alone

I want it as whole as the day it was conceived.

Before you made it into this deformed adventure.

Get out of its way.

NEOPTOLEMUS Look at it.

It wants it all and it wants it now

PHILOKTTES Leave me this little body.

Maybe I can revive it

Take the bow and cast your bread on the waters.

After a long time you may find it again,

for all is vanity and a chase after the wind.

NEOPTOLEMUS Is it a boy or a girl?

ODYSSEUS Hopefully, it's both.

Look at it. See how its mouth searches

for a drop of something sweet.

NEOPTOLEMUS Who does it look like?

PHILOKTTES At this stage, it looks like all of us.

It's ours.

Cuts by right of conquest.

ODYSSEUS What will you call it?

PHILOKTTES Certainly not Jesus.

"As many shall be amazed at it

so shall its appearance be without glory from men

and its glory dishonored by men.

It is a root in a thirly land.

It has no beauty or glory as we see it.

And it has no beauty or comeliness

but its form was ignoble and inferior

to that of all men.

It was a thing struck down by misfortune,

who knows how to bear its infirmity?"

The limitless possibilities of impossibility.

Deliver the sweating child into its mothers' arms.

Backward from the darkness

and forward into the light.

For we are blessed among women.

INSIDE OUT

PHILOKTTES I've worked so long on this haunting.

Make him go away.

NEOPTOLEMUS So what do I care?

PHILOKTTES This is my place. My body.

ODYSSEUS And we want it, dead or alive.

PHILOKTTES Seeing that it's neither

You can't have it.

NEOPTOLEMUS How will you fight the hunger?

The memory pain?

PHILOKTTES Not hungry, not eating.

What use is my body to you?

NEOPTOLEMUS I can't make him go.

Why are you doing this?

PHILOKTTES Why does a ghost do anything?

The dead keep talking.

What's happened to you, Odysseus?

You've become strange and ugly,

desiccated, decayed.

Cremated before your time.

ODYSSEUS I was just thinking the same thing

about you.

PHILOKTTES And Troy?

ODYSSEUS Burn that mother down.

NEOPTOLEMUS Such bad luck?

PHILOKTTES I told you that war was a bad luck

thing.

NEOPTOLEMUS But why for you? For why?

For what?

You're going to wander around haunting

this island for the rest of your life?

PHILOKTTES I enjoy the silence.

NEOPTOLEMUS You're worse than Odysseus.

PHILOKTTES You'll be stuck together. I wouldn't

advise that because he kicks much butt.

You may haunt Troy together someday.

NEOPTOLEMUS Why don't you quit this ghost job
and come with us?
No one has to know, you'll be my own private
ghost.

PHILOKLETES For what? For what? I'm not a ghost.

NEOPTOLEMUS How did you become this?

PHILOKLETES For the last time, I told you I was
kissed by a snake.

in a private, hungry moment.

NEOPTOLEMUS Who did it?

PHILOKLETES It could have been anyone,
anything.

Anywhere, I don't care who or where.
After I had spent all that time on the battlefield,
burning and burying all those bodies.
No one to pick me up and bury me.

They left me here.
When I woke up I was as black as burned wine.
My bones were blue.

I walked all over the island.

But no one would talk to me.

I was standing outside the world.
That's when I knew what was what.

NEOPTOLEMUS And what was that?

PHILOKLETES I had gone from the outside to the
inside. I was inside out.

NEOPTOLEMUS I'm leaving.

PHILOKLETES Is there anything else you want to
say to me?

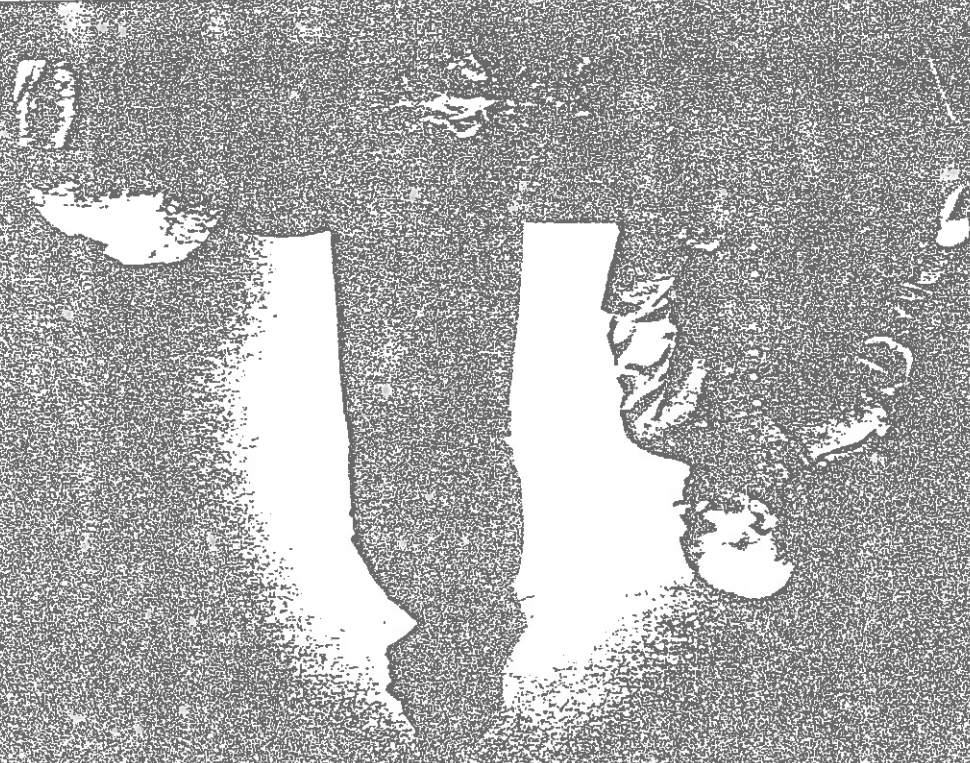
NEOPTOLEMUS Aren't you even going to kiss me
goodbye?

PHILOKLETES For what? For what?

He who drinks from my mouth will be as I am.

NEOPTOLEMUS Kiss me.

PHILOKLETES He who drinks from my mouth will
be as I am.



NEOPTOLEMUS I don't care

PHILOKETES No.

NEOPTOLEMUS And Troy?

PHILOKETES Burn that motherfucker down.

NEOPTOLEMUS You want to stay here on this rock like a cold piece of meat and wait for the grumbling empty-bellied dog on a chain?

PHILOKETES Odysseus? Harmless. A broken spider web.

NEOPTOLEMUS I'm asleep.

I made you out of nothing and now you are nothing.

When I open my eyes we'll be inside out, with or without you.

Come with us.

PHILOKETES No.

NEOPTOLEMUS Anything else you want to say to me?

PHILOKETES Aren't you even going to kiss me goodbye?

NEOPTOLEMUS For why? For what? Why not?

He who drinks from my mouth will be as I am.

PHILOKETES Not reversible. Impossible.

I'm asleep. I made you out of nothing and now you are nothing.

When I open my eyes we'll be inside out.

With or without you.

NEOPTOLEMUS Don't stay.

PHILOKETES Anything else you want to say to me?

NEOPTOLEMUS Aren't you even going to kiss me goodbye?

They kiss.

WAITING FOR A BOAT

NEOPTOLEMUS I found him on the beach, faintly sucking on a piece of rice.

ODYSSEUS What was he doing on the beach?

NEOPTOLEMUS He said he was waiting for a boat.

ODYSSEUS What boat?

NEOPTOLEMUS He was to meet a boat on its way to throw sodium on

the Trojan Empire and put its eye out.

ODYSSEUS A boat won't come by here for another six months.

NEOPTOLEMUS He said he would wait.

ODYSSEUS And our battalion?

NEOPTOLEMUS I saw them hiding behind a dune, nibbling on a chicken wing

and roasting a can of cocktail weenies.

Philoctetes crawled several miles up the beach but he fainted, unable to endure the pain.

Seeing that it was near the end,

his soldiers pushed an anchor through his chest. He layed down and smelled God for the first time.

ODYSSEUS What did it smell like?

NEOPTOLEMUS Clear water.

ODYSSEUS Oh, no.

NEOPTOLEMUS Oh, yes. He begged for a tea of jasmine-flower flakes

but after I doused it he wouldn't drink it.

I gave him an aniseed and a dinner of broiled salmon

but this he also refused.

We tried to raise anchor but it wouldn't move.

He said,

"Send me anything, a sugared skull, a golden calf. Anything, but send me a message."

I said,

"But you are the one who is dying.

You send me a message.

Forget the sugared skull, a groundhog will do."

He was oscillating, severe and pitted.

ODYSSEUS That's nice, dear.

NEOPTOLEMUS I put my wooden hands to my

wooden cheekbones and my

sugared skull and felt myself melt.

I cried wooden tears, and I did melt.

Thus it is written and thus I will say it.

I melted. I did melt.

He blinked once and gave up the ghost.

ODYSSEUS Any message?

NEOPTOLEMUS The underworld is forever empty

but orange trees still blossom under the underworld

ODYSSEUS And under that?

NEOPTOLEMUS Nothing

But scrambled eggs and white rice,

Codfish, bananas, and sand

WHO ARE YOU?

NEOPTOLEMUS Who are you?

PHILOKETES No one

NEOPTOLEMUS I recognize you by your foot, they

told me your foot...

PHILOKETES My foot is dead, kid. I was looking

at it outside.

It had one fly on it.

Pick my foot kid, I'm nobody.

Who am I? No one

As for myself, I was taken here and made prisoner

once.

And I was taken here and put here and stayed here.

And made to stay here.

And I don't know why but I stayed here.

And I stayed in here and I stayed here for a very

long time.

And it was a very long time, a very, very long time.

And it seemed like it was forever.

And it probably was almost forever, almost.

But then one day the door opened beautifully

and I was let out.

But not miraculously.

And I was let out and I went out.

And I wanted to get out and get let out

And when I had gotten out, I didn't want to go

anywhere.

I wanted to stay here.

I mean, not in here, but just here, around here.

And not go home to where I had come from.

And I couldn't even remember where I had come

from.

Or, I could eventually remember.

But I realized that I had been here so long that

all the people that I could remember were

dead.

Or if they were alive, they probably were

so old that they couldn't remember me.

but could remember me probably with sadness.

But there was no way I could ever get back,

because you see, in time, the geography between

here and there

had gotten farther and farther apart.

And so we were too far away from each other to

make any difference.

It wouldn't do any good.

So I realized I just had to stay here and live with it.

And so I'm staying here and I'm happy to stay here.

One day that door opened and it filled up with

light.

And I went outside where everyone else was

And everything else just became a memory

And so that's it.

Good night.

Photos pages 73-89 are from the 1994 production of Philoketes-Variations at Kaaiheater in Brussels. Photos by Maarten Vanden Abeele.

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ΠΑΝΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΙΟ ΑΘΗΝΩΝ
ΤΜΗΜΑ ΑΓΓΛΙΚΗΣ ΓΛΩΣΣΗΣ
ΚΑΙ ΦΙΛΟΛΟΓΙΑΣ - ΒΙΒΛΙΟΘΗΚΗ
op. 810. 13675

by John Barth

- THE FLOATING OPERA
- THE END OF THE ROAD
- THE SOT-WEED FACTOR
- GILES GOAT-BOY
- CHIMERA
- LETTERS
- SABBATICAL: A ROMANCE
- THE FRIDAY BOOK
- THE TIDEWATER TALES

John Barth was born on May 27, 1930, in Cambridge, Maryland. He read widely as a child; and as a student at Johns Hopkins University he was fascinated by Oriental tales-cycles and medieval collections, a body of literature that would later influence his own writing. He received his B.A. from Johns Hopkins in 1951 and his M.A. in 1952. He has held professorships at Pennsylvania State University, the State University of New York at Buffalo, and Boston University. He presently teaches in the English and Creative Writing programs at Johns Hopkins.

Barth's first novel, *The Floating Opera* (1956), was nominated for the National Book Award. *The End of the Road* (1958) was also critically praised. In 1960, *The Sot-Weed Factor*—a comic historical novel—established Barth's reputation. *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966) was a huge critical and commercial success, after which he revised and republished his first three novels. *Lost in the Funhouse*, a book of interconnected stories, earned him a second nomination for the National Book Award. His other works are *Chimera* (1972), a collection of three novellas which won the National Book Award; *Letters* (1979), an epistolary novel; *Sabbatical: A Romance* (1982); and *The Friday Book* (1984), a collection of essays. His latest work is *The Tidewater Tales* (1987).

JOHN BARTH

LOST IN THE FUNHOUSE

Fiction for print, tape,

live voice

1968



ANCHOR BOOKS
DOUBLEDAY

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY AUCKLAND

*The Wide Real World. Sing of the guile
That fetched yours truly to a nameless isle,
By gods, men, and history forgot,
To sing his sorry self.*

And die. And rot. And feed his silly carcass to the birds.

But not before he'd penned a few last words,

inspired by the dregs and lees of the muse herself, at whom, Zeus willing, he'll have a final go before he corks her for good and casts her adrift, vessel of his hopeless hope. The Minstrel's Last Lay.

*Once upon a time
I composed in witty rhyme
And poured libations to the muse Erato.*

*Merope would croon,
"Minstrel mine, a lay! A tune!"
"From bed to verse," I'd answer; "that's my motto."*

*Stranded by my foes,
Nowadays I write in prose,
Forsaking measure, rhyme, and honeyed diction;*

*Amphora's my muse:
When I finish off the booze,
I bump the jug and fill her up with fiction.*

I begin in the middle—where too I'll end, there being alas to my arrested history as yet no dénouement. God knows how long I'd been out of writing material until this morning, not to mention how long altogether. I've been marooned upon this Zeus-forsaken rock, in the middle of nowhere. There, I've been gun, in the middle of nowhere, tricked ashore in manhood's forenoon with nine amphorae of Mycenaean red and abandoned to my own devisings. After half a dozen years of which more later I was down to the last of them, having put her sisters to the triple use aforesung: one by one I broke their seals, drank

ANONYMIAD

HEADPIECE

When Dawn rose, pink as peerless Helen's teat,

which in fact-swung wineskinlike between her hind legs and was piebald as her pelt, on which I write,

*The salty minstrel oped his tear-brined eye,
And remarking it was yet another day . . .*

Ended his life. Commenced his masterpiece. Returned to sleep. Invoked the muse:

Twice-handled goddess! Sing through me the boy

Whom Agamemnon didn't take to Troy,

But left behind to see his wife stayed chaste.

Tell, Muse, how Clytemnestra maced

Her warden into song, made vain his heart

With vision of renown; musick the art

Wherewith was worked self-rum by a youth

Who'd sought in his own art some music truth

About the world and life, of which he knew

Nothing. Tell how ardent his wish grew

To autograph the future, wherefore he

Let sly Aegisthus ship him off to see

the lovelies dry, and, fired by their beneficence, not only made each the temporary mistress of my sole passion but gave back in the form of art what I'd had from them. Me they nourished and inspired; them I fulfilled to the top of my bent, and launched them worldward fraught with our joint conceits. Their names are to me now like the memory of old songs: Euterpe! Polyhymnia! I recall Terpsichore's lovely neck, Urania's matchless shoulders; in dreams I hear Melpomene singing yet in the wet west wind, her voice ever deeper as our romance waned; I touch again Erato's ears, too delicate for mortal clay, surely the work of Aphrodite! I smile at Clio's gravity, who could hold more wine than any of her sisters without growing tipsy; I shake my head still at the unexpected passion of saucy Thalia, how she clung to me even when broken by love's hard knocks. Fair creatures. Often I wonder where the tides of life have fetched them, whether they're undone by age and the world or put on the shelf by some heartless new master. What lovers slake themselves now at those fragile mouths? Do they still bear my charge in them, or is it jettisoned and lost, or brought to light?

With anticipation of Calliope, the last, I consoled me for their casting off. Painful state for a lover, to have always before him the object of his yen—naked, cool, serene—and deny his parched sense any slake but the lovely sight of her! No less a regimen I imposed upon myself—imperfectly, imperfectly, I'm not made of stone, and there she stood, brimful of spirit, heavy with what I craved, sweating delicately where the sun caressed her flank, and like her sisters infinitely accessible! A night came, I confess it, when need overmastered me; I broke my vow and her seal; other nights followed (never many in a season, but blessed Zeus, most blest Apollo, how many empty seasons have gone by!) when, despite all new resolve and cursing my weak-willedness even as I tipped her to my will, I eased my burden with small increase of hers. But take her to me altogether I did not, or possess myself of the bounty I thirsted for, and which freely she would yield. Until last night! Until the present morn!

For in that measureless drear interval, now to be exposed, I had nothing to write upon, no material wherewith to fashion the work I'd vowed she must inspire me to, and with which, in the last act of our loveship and my life, I'd freight her.

Calliope, come, refresh me; it's the hour for exposition!

I'll bare at last my nameless tale, and then . . .

Hie here, sweet Muse: your poet must dip his pen!

I

Ink of the squid, his obscure cloak; blood of my heart; wine of my inspiration: record on Helen's hide, in these my symbols, the ills her namesake wrought what time, forsaking the couch of fairhaired Menelaus, she spread her legs for Paris et cetera.

My trouble was, back home in 'prentice days, I never could come out straight-faced with "Daughter of Zeus, egg-born Clytemnestra" and the rest, or in general take seriously enough the pretensions of reality. Youngster though I was, nowise sophisticated, I couldn't manage the correct long face when Agamemnon hectored us on Debts of Honor, Responsibility to Our Allies, and the like. But I don't fool myself: if I never took seriously the world and its tiresome concerns, it's because I was never able to take myself seriously; and the reason for that, I've known for some while, is the fearsomeness of the facts of life. Merope's love, Helen's whoring, Menelaus's noise, Agamemnon's slicing up his daughter for the weatherman—all the large and deadly passions of men and women, wolves, frogs, nightingales; all this business of seizing life, grabbing hold with both hands—it must've scared the daylight out of me from the first. While other fellows played with their spears, I learned to play the lyre. I wasn't the worst-looking man in Argolis; I had a ready wit and a good ear, and knew how to amuse the ladies. A little more of those virtues (and a lot more nerve, and better luck in the noble-birth way), I might have

been another Paris; it's not your swaggerers like Menelaus the pretty girls fall for, or even your bully-boys like Agamemnon: it's the tricky chaps like Paris, graceful as women themselves almost, with their mischief eyes and honey tongues and nimble fingers, that set maiden hearts a-flutter and spit maidenheads like squablings. Aphrodite takes care of her own. Let that one have his Helen; this musicked to him in his eighteenth year milkmaid Merope, fairest-formed and straightest-hearted that ever mused goatherd into minstrelsy.

Daily then I pastured with that audience, two-score nans and my doe-eye nymph, to whom I sang songs perforce original, as I was ignorant of the common store. Innocent, I sang of innocence, thinking I sang of love and fame. Merope put down her jug, swept back her hair, smiled and listened. In modes of my own invention, as I supposed, I sang my vow to make a name for myself in the world at large.

"Many must wish the same," my honeyhead would murmur. But could she've shown me that every browsy hill in Greece had its dappled nans and famestruck twanger, I'd've not been daunted. My dreams, like my darling, perched light but square on a three-leg seat: first, while I scoffed at them myself, and at the rube their dreamer, I sucked them for life; the world was wide, as my songs attested, its cities flocked with brilliant; I was a nameless rustic plucker, unschooled, unmannered, late finding voice, innocent of fashion, uneasy in the world and my own skin—so much so, my crazy hope of shedding it was all sustained me. Fair as the country was and the goatboy life my fellows' lot, if I could not've imagined my music's one day whisking me Orionlike to the stars, I'd have as well flung myself into the sea. No other fate would even faintly do; an impassioned lack of alternatives moved my tongue; what for another might be heartfelt wish was for me an absolute condition. Second, untutored as I was and narrow my acquaintance, I knew none whose fancy so afflicted him as mine me. Especially when I goated it alone, the world's things took a queer sly aspect: it was as if the olive hillside hummed, not with bees, but with

some rustle secret; the placid goats were in on it; asphodels winked and nodded behind my back; the mountain took broody note; the very sunlight trembled; I was a stranger to my hands and feet. Merope herself, when these humors gripped me, was alien and horrific as a sphinx: her perfect body, its pulse and breath, smote me with dismay: ears! toes! What creature did it wrap, that was not I, that claimed to love me? My own corse was a rude anthropophage that had swallowed me whole at birth and suffered indigestion ever since; could Merope see what I couldn't, who it was spoke from his griped bowles? When she and I, the goats our original, invented love—romped friggly in the glens and found half a hundred pretty pathways to delight, each which we thought ourselves the first to tread—some I as foreign to the me that pleased as goatherd to goats stood by, tight-lipped, watching, or aswoon at the entire strangeness of the world.

And yet, third prop of revery, there *was* Merope, realer than myself though twice my dreams: the ardent fact of her, undeniable as incredible, argued when all else failed that the gods had marked me for no common fate. That a spirit so fresh and unaffected, take my word, no space for details, in a form fit to warm the coach of kings, should elect to give not only ear but heart and dainty everything to a lad the contrary of solipsistic, who felt the world and all its contents real except himself. . . . Perched astride me in a wild-rosemary-patch, her gold skin sweating gently from our sport, her gold hair tenting us, Merope'd say: "I love you"; and while one of me inferred: "Therefore I am," and another wondered whether she was nymph doing penance for rebuffing Zeus or just maid with unaccountable defect of good sense, a third exulted: "Then nothing is impossible!" and set out to scale Parnassus blithely as he'd peaked the mount of Love.

Had I known what cloak of climbers mantles that former hill, so many seasoneder and cleverer than I, some schooled for the ascent from earliest childhood, versed in the mountain's every crag and col, rehearsed in the lore of former climbers. . . . But

I didn't, except in that corner of my fancy that imaged all possible discouragements and heeded none. As a farm boy, innocent of the city's size, confidently expects on his first visit there to cross paths with the one inhabitant he knows among its scores of thousands, and against all reason does, so when at market-time I took goats to golden Mycenae to be sold at auction, I wasn't daunted as I should've been by the pros who minstrelled every wineshop, but leaned me on the Lion's Gate, took up my lyre, and sang a sprightly goat-song, fully expecting that the Queen herself would hear and call for me.

The song, more or less improvised, had to do with a young man who announces himself, in the first verse, to be a hickly swain new-come from the busky outback: he sings what a splendid fellow he is, fit consort for a queen. In the second verse he's accosted by an older woman who declares that while she doubtless appears a whore, she is in fact the Queen disguised; she takes the delighted singer to a crib in the common stews, which she asserts to be a wing of the palace reconstructed, at her order, to resemble a-brothel: the trulls and trollops thereabout, she explains, are gentlewomen at their sport, the pimps and navvies their disguised noble lovers. Did the masquerade strike our minstrel as excessive? He was to bear in mind that the whims of royalty are like the gods', mighty in implementation and consequence. Her pleasure, she discloses in the third verse, is that he should lie with her as with a woman of the streets, the newest fashion among great ladies: she's chosen him for her first adventure of this sort because, while obviously not of noble birth, he's of somewhat gentler aspect than the lot of commoners; to make the pretense real, he's to pay her a handsome love-price, which she stipulates. The fellow laughs and agrees, but respectfully points out that her excessive fee betrays her innocence of prostitution; if verisimilitude is her object, she must accept the much lower wage he names. Not without expressions of chagrin the lady acquiesces, demanding only the right to earn a bonus for meritorious performance. In the fifth and sixth verses they set to, in manner described in salacious but musically ad-

mirable cadenzas; in the seventh the woman calls for fee and bonus, but her minstrel lover politely declines: to her angry protests he replies, in the eighth verse, that despite herself she makes love like a queen; her excellency shows through the cleverest disguise. How does he know? Because, he asserts, he's not the rustic he has feigned, but an exile prince in flight from the wrath of a neighbor king, whose queen had been his mistress until their amour came to light. Begging the amazed and skeptic lady not to betray him to the local nobility so well masked, he pledges in return to boast to no one that he has lain with Her Majesty. As I fetched him from the stews wondering mellifluously whether his partner was a queen disguised as a prostitute or a prostitute disguised as a queen disguised et cetera, I was seized by two armored guards and fetched myself to a room above a nearby wineshop. The premises were squalid; the room was opulent; beside a window overlooking the Lion's Gate sat a regal dame ensconced in handmaids.

What about the minstrel, she wanted to know: Was he a prince in mufti or a slickering rustic? Through my tremble I saw bright eyes in her sharp-bone countenance. I struck a chord to steady my hand, wrung rhymes from alarmed memory, took a breath, and sang in answer:

*"As Tyrian robe may cloak a bumpkin heart,
So homespun bick may play the royal part.
Men may be kings in spirit or in mien.
Which make more kingly lovers? Ask a queen!*

But don't ask me which sort of queen to ask," I added quickly; "I haven't been in town long enough to learn the difference."

The maids clapped hands to mouths; the lady's eyes flashed, whether with anger or acknowledgment I couldn't judge. "See he goes to school on the matter," she ordered a plumpish gentleman across the room, eunuch by the look of him. Then she dismissed us, suddenly frowsome, and turned to the window, as one waiting for another to appear.

On with the story, cut corners: Clytemnestra herself it was,

went to rest from her market pleasures in that apartment. Her eunuch—Chief Minstrel, it turned out—gave me a gold piece and bade me report to him in Agamemnon's scullery when I came to town, against the chance the whim should take Her Majesty to hear me again. Despite the goldhair wonder that rested on my chest as I reported this adventure next day, I was astonished after all that dreams come true.

"The King and Queen are real!" I marveled. "They want *me* to minstrel them!"

Fingering my forearm Merope said: "Because you're the best." I must go to town often, we agreed, perhaps even live there; on the other hand, it would be an error to put by my rustic origins and speech, as some did: in song, at least (where dwelt the only kings and courtiers we knew), such pretense always came a cropper. Though fame and clever company no doubt would change me in some ways, I should not change myself for them, it being on the one hand Merope's opinion that worldliness too ardently pursued becomes affectation, mine on the other that innocence artificially preserved becomes mere crankhood.

"We'll come back here often," I told her, "to remind us who we are."

She stroked my fingers, in those days scarcely calloused by the lyre. "Was the Queen very beautiful?"

I promised to notice next time. Soon after, we bid the goats goodbye and moved to Mycenae. Merope was frightened by the din of so many folk and wagons and appalled by everyone's bad manners, until I explained that these were part of the excitement of city life. Every day, all day, in our mean little flat, I practiced my art, which before I'd turned to only when the mood was on me; evening I reported to the royal kitchen, where lingered a dozen other mountebanks and minstrels just in favor. Ill at ease in their company, I kept my own, but listened amazed to their cynic jokes about the folk they flattered in their lays, and watched with dismay the casual virtuosity with which they performed for one another's amusement while waiting the

royal pleasure. I hadn't half their skill and wit! Yet the songs I made from my rural means—of country mouse and city mouse, or the war between the ants and the mice—were well enough received; especially when I'd got the knack of subtly mocking in such conceits certain figures in the court—those who, like the King, were deaf to irony—I'd see Clytemnestra's eyes flash over her wine, as if to say, "Make asses of *them* all you please, but don't think you're fooling me!" and a coin or two would find their way meward. Flattering it was, for a nameless country lad, to hear the Queen herself praise his songs and predict a future for him in the minstrel way. When I got home, often not till sunup, I'd tell my sleepish darling all I'd seen and done, and there'd be love if the day hadn't spent me, which alas it sometimes had. That first gold piece I fetched to a smith and caused to be forged into a ring, gift to the gods' gift to me; but I mis-guessed the size, and fearing she'd lose it, Merope bade me wear it in her stead.

1 1/2

Once upon a time I told tales straight out, alternating summary and dramatization, developing characters and relationships, laying on bright detail and rhetorical flourish, et cetera. I'm not that amateur at the Lion's Gate; I know my trade. But I fear we're too far gone now for such luxury, Helen and I; I must get to where I am; the real drama, for yours truly, is whether he can trick this tale out at all—not the breath-batingest plot in the world, but there we are. It's an old story anyhow, this part of it; the corpus bloats with its like; I'll throw you the bones, to flesh out or pick at as you will.

What I had in mind was an *Anonymiad* in nine parts, reflecting (so you were to've nudged your neighbor and observed) the nine amphorae and ditto muses; or seven parts plus head- and tailpiece: the years of my maroonment framed by its causes and prognosis. The prologue was to've established, hopefully has

done, the ground-conceit and the narrative voice and viewpoint: a minstrel struck on some Aegean clinker commences his story, in the process characterizing himself and hinting at the circumstances leading to his plight. Parts One through Four were to rehearse those circumstances, Five through Seven the stages of his island life vis-à-vis his minstrelling—innocent garrulity, numb silence, and terse self-knowledge, respectively—and fetch the narrator's present time up to the narrator's. The epilogue's a sort of envoi to whatever eyes, against all odds, may one day read it. But though you're to go through the several parts in order, they haven't been set down that way: after writing the headpiece I began to fear that despite my planning I mightn't have space enough to get the tale told; since it pivots about Part Four (the headpiece and three parts before, three parts and the tailpiece after), I divided Helen's hide in half to insure the right narrative proportions; then, instead of proceeding with the exposition heralded at the tail of the headpiece, I took my cue from a remark I'd made earlier on, began in the middle, and wrote out Parts Five, Six, and Seven. Stopping at the head of the tailpiece, which I'm leaving blank for my last words, I returned to compose Parts One, Two, and Three, and the pivotal Part Four. But alas, there's more to my matter and less to my means than I'd supposed; for a while at least I'll have to tell instead of showing; if you must have dialogue and dashing about, better go to the theater.

So, so: the rest of Part One would've shown the minstrel, under the eunuch's tutelage, becoming more and more a professional artist until he's Clytemnestra's pet entertainer. A typical paragraph runs: *We got on, the Queen and I, especially when the Paris-thing blew up and Agamemnon started conscripting his sister-in-law's old boyfriends. Clytemnestra wasn't impressed by all the spear-rattling and the blather of National Honor, any more than I, and couldn't've cared less what happened to Helen. She'd been ugly duckling in the house of Tyndareus, Clytie, second prize in the house of Atreus; she knew Agamemnon envied his brother, and that plenty of Trojan*

slave-girls would see more of the Family Jewels, while he was avenging the family honor, than she'd seen in some ruble. Though she'd got a bit hard-boiled by life in Mycenae, she was still a Grade-A figure of a woman; it's a wonder she didn't put horns on him long before the war. . . .

In addition to their expository function, this and like passages establish the minstrel's growing familiarity and preoccupation with affairs of court. His corresponding professional sophistication, at expense of his former naive energy, was to be rendered as a dramatic correlative to the attrition of his potency with Merope (foreshadowed by the earlier ring-business and the Chief Minstrel's eunuchhood), or vice versa. While still proud of her lover's success, Merope declares in an affecting speech that she preferred the simple life of the goat pasture and the ditto songs he sang there, which now seem merely to embarrass him. The minstrel himself wonders whether the changes in his life and work are for the better: the fact is—as he makes clear on the occasion of their revisiting the herd—that having left the country but never, despite his success, quite joined the court, he feels out of place now in both. Formerly he sang of bills and nans as Daphnises and Chloes; latterly he sings of courtly lovers as bucks and does. His songs, he fears, are growing in some instances merely tricky, in others crankish and obscure; moreover, the difficulties of his position in Mycenae have increased with his reputation: Agamemnon presses on the one hand for anti-Trojan songs in the national interest, Clytemnestra on the other for anti-Iliads to feed her resentment. Thus far he's contrived a precarious integrity by satirizing his own dilemma, for example—but arthritis is retiring the old eunuch, and our narrator has permitted himself to imagine that he's among the candidates for the Chief-Minstrelship, despite his youth: should he be so laureled, the problem of quid pro quo might become acute. All these considerations notwithstanding (he concludes), one can't pretend to an innocence outgrown or in other wise retrace one's steps, unless by coming full circle. Merope doesn't reply; the minstrel attempts to entertain her with a new com-

position, but neither she nor the goats (who'd used to gather when he sang) seem much taken by it. The rest of the visit goes badly.

2

Part Two opens back in Mycenae, where all is a-bustle with war preparations. The minstrel, in a brilliant trope which he predicts will be as much pirated by later bards as his device of beginning in the middle, compares the scene to a beehive; he then apostrophizes on the war itself:

The war, the war! To be cynical of its warrant was one thing—bloody madness it was, whether Helen or Hellespont was the prize—and my own patriotism was nothing bellicose: dear and deep as I love Argolis, Troy's a fine place too, I don't doubt, and the Trojan women as singable as ours. To Hades with wars and warriors: I had no illusions about the expedition.

Yet I wanted to go along! Your dauber, maybe, or your marble-cracker, can hole up like a sybil in a cave, just him and the muse, and get a lifeswork done; even Erato's boys, if they're content to sing twelve-liners all their days about Porphyria's eyebrow and Althea's navel, can forget the world outside their bedchambers. But your minstrel who aspires to make and people worlds of his own had better get to know the one he's in, whether he cares for it or not. I believe I understood from the beginning that a certain kind of epic was my fate: that the years I was to spend, in Mycenae and here [i.e., here, this island, where we are now], turning out clever lyrics, satires, and the like, were as it were apprenticeships in love, flirtation-trials to fit me for master-husbandhood and the string upon broad-hipped Calliope, like Zeus upon Alcmena, of a very Heracles of fictions. "First fact of our generation," Agamemnon called the war in his recruitment speeches; how should I, missing it, speak to future times as the voice of ours?

He adds: *Later I was to accept that I wasn't of the genera-*

tion of Agamemnon, Odysseus, and those other giant brawlers (in simple truth I was too young to sail with the fleet), nor yet of Telemachus and Orestes, their pale shadows. To speak for the age, I came to believe, was less achievement than to speak for the ageless; my membership in no particular generation I learned to treasure as a passport out of history, or exemption from the drafts of time. But I begged the King to take me with him, and was crestfallen when he refused. No use Clytemnestra's declaring (especially when the news came in from Aulis that they'd cut up Iphigenia) it was my clearsightedness her husband couldn't stick, my not having hymned the bloody values of his crowd; what distressed me as much as staying home from Troy was a thing I couldn't tell her of: Agamemnon's secret arrangement with me . . . his reflections upon and acceptance of which end the episode—or chapter, as I call the divisions of my unversed fictions. Note that no mention is made of Merope in this excursus, which pointedly develops a theme (new to literature) first touched on in Part One: the minstrel's yen for a broader range of life-experience. His feeling is that having left innocence behind, he must pursue its opposite; though his conception of "experience" in this instance is in terms of travel and combat, the metaphor with which he figures his composing-plans is itself un-innocent in a different sense.

The truth is that he and his youthful sweetheart find themselves nightly more estranged. Merope is unhappy among the courtiers and musicians, who speak of nothing but Mycenaean intrigues and Lydian minors; the minstrel ditto among everyone else, now that his vocation has become a passion—though he too considers their palace friends mostly fops and bores, not by half so frank and amiable as the goats. The "arrangement" he refers to is concluded just before the King's departure for Aulis; Agamemnon calls for the youth and without preamble offers him the title of Acting Chief Minstrel, to be changed to Chief Minstrel on the fleet's return. Astonished, the young man realizes, as after his good fortune at the Lion's Gate, how much his expectations have in fact been desperate dream:

"I . . . I accept [I have him cry gratefully, thus becoming the first author in the world to reproduce the stammers and hesitations of actual human speech. But the whole conception of a literature faithful to daily reality is among the innovations of this novel opus!]"—whereupon the King asks "one small favor in return." Even as the minstrel protests, in hexameters, that he'll turn his music to no end beyond itself, his heart breaks at the prospect of declining the title after all:

Where to, like windfall wealth, he had at once got used.

Tut, Agamemnon replies: though he personally conceives it the duty of every artist not to stand aloof from the day's great issues, he's too busy coping with them to care, and has no ear for music anyhow. All he wants in exchange for the proffered title is that the minstrel keep a privy eye on Clytemnestra's activities, particularly in the sex and treason way, and report any infidelities on his return.

Unlikeliest commission [the minstrel exclaims to you at this point, leaving ambiguous which commission is meant!] *The King and I were nowise confidential; just possibly he meant to console me for missing the fun in Troy (he'd see it so) by giving me to feel important on the home front. But chances are he thought himself a truly clever fellow for leaving a spy behind to watch for horns on the royal brow, and what dismayed me was less the ingenuousness of that plan—I knew him no Odysseus—as his assumption that from me he had nothing to fear! As if I were my gelded predecessor, or some bugger of my fellow man (no shortage of those in the profession), or withal so unattractive Clytemnestra'd never give me a tumble! And I a lyric poet, Aphrodite's very barrister, the Queen's Chief Minstrel!*

No more is said on this perhaps surprising head for the present; significantly, however, his reluctance to compromise his professional integrity is expressed as a concern for what Merope will think. On the other hand, he reasons, the bargain has nothing to do with his art; he'll compose what he'll compose whether lauded or un, and a song fares well or ill irrespective of its maker. In the long run Chief-Minstrelships and the like are

meaningless; precisely therefore their importance in the short. Muse willing, his name will survive his lifetime; he will not, and had as well seize what boon the meanwhile offers. He accepts the post on Agamemnon's terms.

Part Three, consequently, will find the young couple moved to new lodgings in the palace itself, more affluent and less happy. Annoyance at what he knows would be her reaction has kept the minstrel from confiding to his friend the condition of his Acting Chief Minstrelship; his now-nearly-constant attendance on the

No use, this isn't working either, we're halfway through, the end's in sight; I'll never get to where I am; Part Three, Part Three, my crux, my core, I'm cutting you out; ———; there, at the heart, never to be filled, a mere lacuna.

4

The trouble with us minstrels is, when all's said and done we love our work more than our women. More, indeed, than we love ourselves, else I'd have turned me off long since instead of persisting on this rock, searching for material, awaiting inspiration, scrawling out in nameless numbrood futile notes . . . for an *Anonymiad*, which heretofore, having made an Iphigenia of Chapter Three, I can transcribe directly to the end of my skin. To be moved to art instead of to action by one's wretchedness may preserve one's life and sanity; at the same time, it may leave one wretcheder yet.

My mad commission from Agamemnon, remember, was not my only occupation in that blank chapter; I was also developing my art, by trial, error, and industry, with more return than that other project yielded. I examined our tongue, the effects wrought in it by minstrels old and new and how it might speak eloquentest for me. I considered the fashions in art and ideas, how perhaps to enlist their aid in escaping their grip. And I studied myself, musewise at least: who it was spoke through the

bars of my music like a prisoner from the keep; what it was he strove so laboriously to enounce, if only his name; and how I might accomplish, or at least abet, his unfeathering. In sum I schooled myself in all things pertinent to master-minstrelling—save one, the wide world, my knowledge whereof remained largely secondhand. Alas: for where Fancy's springs are unleve'd by hard Experience they run too free, flooding every situation with possibilities until Prudence and even Common Sense are drowned.

Thus when it became apparent that Clytemnestra was indeed considering an affair—but with Agamemnon's cousin, and inspired not by the passion of love, which was out of her line, but by a resolve to avenge the sacrifice of Iphigenia—and that my folly had imperiled my life, my title, and my Merope, I managed to persuade myself not only that the Queen might be grateful after all for my confession and declaration, but that Merope's playing up to coarse Aegisthus in the weeks that followed might be meant simply to twit me for having neglected her and to spur my distracted ardor. A worldlier wight would've fled the *poils*: I hung on.

And composed! Painful irony, that anguish made my lyre speak ever eloquent; that the odes on love's miseries I sang nightly may have not only fed Clytemnestra's passions and inspired Aegisthus's, but brought Merope's untimely into play as well, and wrought my downfall! He was no Agamemnon, Thyestes's son, nor any matchwit for the Queen, but he was no fool, either; he assessed the situation in a hurry, and whether his visit to Mycenae had been innocent or not to begin with, he saw soon how the land lay, and stayed on. Ingenious, aye, dear Zeus, I was ingenious, but jealousy sharpens a man's eyes: I saw his motive early on, as he talked forever of Iphigenia, and slandered Helen, and teased Merope, and deplored the war, and spoke as if jestingly of the power his city and Clytemnestra's would have, joined under one ruler—all the while deferring to the Queen's judgments, flattering her statecraft, asking her counsel on administrative matters . . . and smacking lips loudly

whenever Merope, whom he'd demanded as his table-servant at first sight of her, went 'round with the wine.

Me too he flattered, I saw it clear enough, complimenting my talent, repeating Clytemnestra's praises, marveling that I'd made so toothsome a conquest as Merope. By slyly pretending to assume that I was the Queen's gigolo and asking me with a wink how she was in bed, he got from me a hot denial I'd ever tupp'd her; by acknowledging then that a bedmate like Merope must indeed leave a man itchless for other company, he led me to hints of my guiltful negligence in that quarter. Thereafter he grew bolder at table, declaring he'd had five hundred women in his life and inviting Clytemnestra to become the five hundred first, if only to spite Agamemnon, whom he frankly loathed, and Merope the five hundred second, after which he'd seduce whatever other women the palace offered. Me, to be sure, he laughed, he'd have to get rid of, or geld like certain other singers; why didn't I take a trip somewhere, knock about the world a bit, taste foreign cookery and foreign wenches, fight a few fist-fights, sire a few bastards? 'Twould be the making of me, minstrelwise! He and the Queen meanwhile would roundly cuckold Agamemnon, just for sport of it, combine their two kingdoms, and, if things worked out, give hubby the ax and make their union permanent: Clytemnestra could rule the roost, and he'd debauch himself among the taverns and Meropes of their joint domain.

All this, mind, in a spirit of railleury; Clytemnestra would chuckle, and Merope chide him for overboldness. But I saw how the Queen's eyes flashed, no longer at my cadenzas; and Merope'd say later, "At least he can talk about something besides politics and music." I laughed too at his sallies, however anxiously by Merope's pleasure in her new role, for the wretch was sharp, and though it sickened me to picture him atop the Queen—not to mention my frustrate darling!—heaving his paunch upon her and grinning through his whiskers, I admired his brash way with them and his gluttony for life's delights, so opposite to my poor temper. Aye, aye, there was my ruin!

I liked the scoundrel after all, as I liked Clytemnestra and even Agamemnon; as I liked Merope, quite apart from loving or desiring her, whose impish spirit and vivacity reblossomed, in Aegisthus's presence, for the first time since we'd left the goats, and quite charmed the Mycenaean court. Most of all I was put down by the sheer energy of the lot of them: sackers of cities, breakers of vows, scorners of minstrels—admirable, fearsome! Watching Clytemnestra's eyes, I could hear her snarl with delight beneath the gross usurper, all the while she contemned his luxury and schemed her schemes; I could see herself take ax to Agamemnon, laugh with Aegisthus at their bloody hands, draw him on her at the corpse's side—smile, even, as she dirked him at the moment of climax! Him too I could hear laugh at her guile as his life pumped out upon her: bloody fine trick, Clytie girl, and enjoy your kingdom! And in Merope, my gentle, my docile, my honey: in her imperious new smile, in how she smartly snatched and bit the hand Aegisthus pinched her with, there began to stir a woman more woman than the pair of Leda's hatchlings. No, no, I was not up to them, I was not up to life—but it was myself I despised therefor, not the world.

Weeks passed; Clytemnestra made no reference to my *gaffe*; Merope grew by turns too silent with me, too cranky, or too sweet. I began to imagine them both Aegisthus's already; indeed, for aught I knew in dismalest moments they might be whoring it with every man in the palace, from Minister of Trade to horse-groom, and laughing at me with all Mycenae. Meanwhile, goat-face Aegisthus continued to praise my art (not without discernment for all his coarseness, as he had a good ear and knew every minstrel in the land) even as he teased my timid manner and want of experience. No keener nose in Greece for others' weaknesses: he'd remark quite seriously, between jests, that with a little knowledge of the world I might become in fact its chief minstrel; but if I tasted no more of life than Clytemnestra's dinner parties, of love no more than Merope's favors however extraordinary, perforce I'd wither in the bud while my

colleagues grew to fruition. Let Athens, he'd declare, be never so splendid; nonetheless, of a man whose every day is passed within its walls one says, not that he's been to Athens, but that he's been nowhere. Every song I composed was a draught from the wine jug of my experience, which if not replenished must anon run dry. . . .

"Speaking of wine," he added one evening, "two of Clytie's boats are sailing tomorrow with a cargo of it to trade along the coast, and I'm shipping aboard for the ride. Ten ports, three warehouses each, home in two months. Why not go too?"

At thought of his departure my heart leaped up: I glanced at Merope, standing by with her flagon, and found her coolly smiling meward, no stranger to the plan. Aegisthus read my face and roared.

"She'll keep, Minstrel! And what a lover you'll be when you get back!"

Clytemnestra, too, arched brows and smiled. Under other circumstances I might've found some sort of voyage appealing, since I'd been nowhere; as was I wanted only to see Aegisthus gone. But those smiles—on the one hand of the queen of my person, on the other of that queen of my heart whom I would so tardily recrown—together unnerved me. I'd consider the invitation overnight, I murmured, unless the Queen ordered one course or the other.

"I think the voyage is a good idea," Clytemnestra said promptly, and added in Aegisthus's teasing wise: "With you two out of the palace, Merope and I can get some sleep." My heart was stung by their new camaraderie and the implication, however one took it, that their sleep had been being disturbed. The Queen asked for Merope's opinion.

"He's often said a minstrel has to see the world," my darling replied. Was it spite or sadness in the steady eyes she turned to me? "Go see it. It's all the same to me."

Prophetic words! How they mocked the siren Experience, whose song I heeded above the music of my own heart! To perfect the irony of my foolishness, Aegisthus here changed

strategy, daring me, as it were, to believe the other, bitter meaning of her words, which I was to turn upon my tongue for many a desolated year.

"Don't forget," he reminded me with a grin: "I might be out to trick you! Maybe I'll heave you overboard one night, or maroon you on a rock and have Merope to myself! For all you know, Minstrel, she might want to be rid of you; this trip might be *her* idea. . . ."

Limply I retorted, his was a sword could cut both ways. My accurst and heart-hurt fancy cast up reasons now for sailing in despite of all: my position in Mycenæ was hot, and might be cooled by a sea journey; Agamemnon could scarcely blame me for his wife's misconduct if I was out of town on her orders; perhaps there were Chief-Minstrelships to be earned in other courts; I'd achieve a taintless fame and send word for Merope to join me. At very least she would be safe from his predations while we were at sea; my absence, not impossibly, would make her heart fonder; I'd find some way to get us out of Mycenæ when I returned, et cetera. Meantime . . . I shivered . . . the world, the world! My breath came short, eyes teared; we laughed, Aegisthus and I, and at Clytemnestra's smiling hest drank what smiling Merope poured.

And next day we two set sail, and laughed and drank across the wine-dark sea to our first anchorage: a flowered, goated, rockbound isle. Nor did Aegisthus's merry baiting cease when we put ashore with nine large amphoræ: the local maidens, he declared, were timid beauties whose wont it was to spy from the woods when a ship came by; nimble as goddesses they were at the weaving of figured tapestries, which they bartered for wine, the island being grapeless; but so shy they'd not approach till the strangers left, whereupon they'd issue from their hiding places and make off with the amphoræ, leaving in exchange a fair quantity of their ware. Should a man be clever enough to lay hold of them, gladly they'd buy their liberty with love; but to catch them was like catching at rain-

bows or the chucklings of the sea. What he proposed therefore was that we conceal us in a ring of wine jugs on the beach, bid the crew stand by offshore, snatch us each a maiden when they came a-fetching, and enjoy the ransom. Better yet, I could bait them with music, which he'd been told was unknown on the island.

"Unless you think I'm inventing all this to trick you," he added with a grin. "Wouldn't you look silly jumping out to grab an old wine merchant, or squatting there hot and bothered while I sail back to Mycenæ!"

He *dared* me to think him honest; dared me to commit myself to delicious, preposterous fantasy. Ah, he played me like a master lyrist his instrument, with reckless inspiration, errless art.

"The bloody world's a dare!" he went so far as to say, elbowing my arm as we ringed the jugs. "Your careful chaps never look foolish, but they never taste the best of it, either!" Think how unlikely the prospect was, he challenged me, that anything he'd said was true; think how crushing it would be to be victim of my own stupendous gullibility more than of his guile; how bitterer my abandonment in the knowledge that he and Merope and Clytemnestra were not only fornicating all over the palace but laughing at my innocence, as they'd done from the first, till their sides ached. "On the other hand," he concluded fiercely, and squeezed my shoulder, "think what you'll miss if it turns out I was telling you the truth and you were too sensible to believe it! Young beauties, Minstrel, shy as yourself and sweet as a dream! That's what we're here for, isn't it? Meropes by the dozen, ours for the snatching! Oh my gods, what the world can be, if you dare grab hold! And what a day!"

The last, at least, was real enough: never such a brilliant forenoon, sweet beach, besplendored sea! My head ached with indecision; the rough crew grinned by the boat, leaning on their oars. Life roared oceanlike with possibility: outrageous risks! outrageous joys! I stood transfixed, helpless to choose; Aegisthus

snatched my lyre, clubbed me with a whang among the amphorae, sprang into the boat. I lay where felled, in medias res, and wept with relief to be destroyed at last; the sailors' guffaws as they pulled away were like a music.

5

Long time I lay a-beachèd, even slept, and dreamed a dream more real than the urch that had marooned me. My privy music drew the island girls: smooth-limbed, merry-eyed Meropes; I seized the first brown wrist that came in reach; her sisters fled. Mute, or too frightened to speak, my victim implored me with her eyes. She was lovely, slender, delicate, and (farewell, brute dreams) real: a human person, sense and flesh, undeniable as myself and for aught I knew as lonely. A real particular history had fetched her to that time and place, as had fetched me; she too, not impossibly, was gull of the wily world, a trickèd innocent and hapless self-deceiver. Perhaps she had a lover, or dreamed of one; might be she was fond of singing, balmèd fragile sense with art. She was in my power; I let her go; she stood a moment rubbing her wrist. I begged her pardon for alarming her; it was loneliness, I said, made my fancy cruel. My speech was no doubt foreign to her; no doubt she expected ravishment, having been careless enough to get caught; perhaps she'd *wanted* a tumbling, been slow a-purpose, what did I know of such matters? It would not have surprised me to see her sneer at a man not man enough to force her; perhaps I would yet, it was not too late; I reached out my hand, she caught it up with a smile and kissed it, I woke to my real-life plight.

In the days thereafter, I imagined several endings to the dream: she fled with a laugh or hoot; I pursued her or did not, caught her or did not, or she returned. In my favorite ending we became friends: gentle lovers, affectionate and lively. I called her by the name of that bee-sweet form I'd graced her with, she me my own in the clover voice that once had crooned

it. I tried imagining her mad with passion for me, as women in song were for their beloveds—but the idea of my inspiring such emotion made me smile. No, I would settle for a pastoral affection spiced with wild seasons, as I'd known; I did not need adoring. We would wed, get sons and daughters; why hadn't I Merope? We would even be faithful, a phenomenon and model to the faithless world. . . .

Here I'd break off with a groan, not that my bedreamèd didn't exist (or any other life on my island, I presently determined, except wild goats and birds), but that she did, and I'd lost her. The thought of Merope in the swart arms of Aegisthus, whether or not she mocked my stranding, didn't drive me to madness or despair, as I'd expected it would; only to rue that I'd not been Aegisthus enough to keep her in my own. Like him, like Agamemnon, like Iphigenia for all I knew, I had got my character's desert.

Indeed, when I'd surveyed the island and unstoppered the first of the crocks, I was able to wonder, not always wryly, whether the joke wasn't on my deceivers. It was a perfumed night; the sea ran hushed beneath a gemmèd sky; there were springs of fresh water, trees of wild fruit, vines of wild grape; I could learn to spear fish, snare birds, milk goats. My lyre was unstrung forever, but I had a voice to sing with, an audience once more of shaggy nans and sea birds—and my fancy to recompense for what it had robbed me of. There was all the world I needed; let the real one clip and tumble, burn and bleed; let Agamemnon pull down towns and rape the widows of the slain; let Menelaus shake the plain with war-shouts and Helen take on all comers; let maids grow old, princes rich, poets famous—I had imagination for realm and mistress, and her dower language! Isolated from one world by Agamemnon, from another by my own failings, I'd make Mycenaes of which I was the sole inhabitant, and sing to myself from their golden towers the one tale I knew.

Crockèd bravery; I smile at it now, but for years it kept me off the rocks, and though my moods changed like the sea-

face, I accomplished much. Now supposing I'd soon be rescued I piled up beacons on every headland; now imagining a lengthy tenure, in fits of construction I raised me a house, learned to trap and fish, cultivated fruits and berries, made goatsmilk cheese and wrappings of hide—and filled jar after jar with the distillations of my fancy. Then would come sieges of despair, self-despisal, self-pity; gripped as by a hand I would gasp with wretchedness on my pallet, unable to muster resolve enough to leap into the sea. Impossible to make another hexameter, groan at another sundown, weep at another rosy-fingered dawn! But down the sun went, and re-rose; anon the wind changed quarter; I'd fetch me up, wash and stretch, and with a sigh prepare a fresh batch of ink, wherein I was soon busily aswim.

It was this invention saved me, for better or worse. I had like my fellow bards been used to composing in verse and committing the whole to memory, along with the minstrel repertoire. But that body of song, including my Mycenaean productions, rang so hollow in my stranded ears I soon put it out of mind. What are Zeus's lecheries and Hera's revenge, to a man on a rock? No past musings seemed relevant to my new estate, about which I found such a deal to say, memory couldn't keep pace. Moreover, the want of any audience but asphodel, goat, and tern played its part after all in the despairs that threatened me: a man sings better to himself if he can imagine someone's listening. In time therefore I devised solutions to both problems. Artist through, I'd been wont since boyhood when pissing on beach or bank to make designs and clever symbols with my water. From this source, as from Pegasus's idle hooftap on Mount Helicon, sprang now a torrent of inspiration: using tanned skins in place of a sand-beach, a seagull-feather for my tool, and a mixture of wine, blood, and squid-ink for a medium, I developed a kind of coded markings to record the utterance of mind and heart. By drawing out these chains of symbols I could so preserve and display my tale, it was unnecessary to remember it. I could therefore compose more and faster; I came largely to exchange song for written speech,

and when the gods vouchsafed me a further great idea, that of launching my productions worldward in the empty amphorae, they loosed from my dammed soul a Deucalion-flood of literature.

For eight jugsworth of years thereafter, saving the spells of inclement weather aforementioned, I gloried in my isolation and seeded the waters with its get, what I came to call *fiction*. That is, I found that by pretending that things had happened which in fact had not, and that people existed who didn't, I could achieve a lovely truth which actuality obscures—especially when I learned to abandon myth and pattern my fabrications on actual people and events: Menelaus, Helen, the Trojan War. It was *as if* there were this minstrel and this milkmaid, et cetera; one could I believe draw a whole philosophy from that *as if*.

Two vessels I cargoad with rehearsals of traditional minstrelsy, bringing it to bear in this novel mode on my current circumstances. A third I freighted with imagined versions, some satiric, of "the first fact of our generation": what was going on at Troy and in Mycenae. To the war and Clytemnestra's treachery I worked out various dénouements: Trojan victories, Argive victories, easy and arduous homecomings, consequences tragical and comic. I wrote a version wherein Agamemnon kills his brother, marries Helen, and returns to Lacedaemon instead of to Mycenae; another in which he himself is murdered by Clytemnestra, who arranges as well the assassination of the other expeditionary prince and thus becomes empress of both Hellas and Troy, with Paris as her consort and Helen as her cook—until all are slain by young Orestes, who then shares the throne with Merope, adored by him since childhood despite the difference in their birth. I was fonder of that one than of its less likely variants—such as that, in cuckold fury, Agamemnon butchers Clytemnestra's whole ménage except Merope, who for then rejecting his advances is put ashore to die on the island where everyone supposes I've perished long since. We meet; she declares it was in hopes of saving me she in-

dulged Aegisthus; I that it was the terror of her love and beauty drove me from her side. We embrace, sweetly as once in rosemaryland. . . . But I could only smile at such notions, for in my joy at having discovered the joy of writing, the world might've offered me Mycenae and got but a shrug from me. Indeed, one night I fancied I heard a Meropish voice across the water, calling the old name she called me by—and I ignored that call to finish a firelit chapter. Had Merope—aye, Trojan Helen herself—trespassed on my island in those days, I'd have flayed her as soon as I'd laid her, and on that preciousset of parchments scribed the little history of our love.

By the seventh jug, after effusions of religious narrative, ribald tale-cycles, verse-dramas, comedies of manners, and what-all, I had begun to run out of world and material—though not of ambition, for I could still delight in the thought of my amphorae floating to the wide world's shores, being discovered by who knew whom, salvaged from the deep, their contents deciphered and broadcast to the ages. Even when, in black humors, I imagined my *opera* sinking undiscovered (for all I could tell, none might've got past the rocks of my island), or found but untranslated, or translated but ignored, I could yet console myself that Zeus at least, or Poseidon, read my heart's record. Further, further: should the Olympians themselves prove but dreams of our minstrel souls (I'd changed my own conception of their nature several times), still I could soothe me with the thought that somewhere outside myself my enciphered spirit drifted, realer than the gods, its significance as objective and undecoded as the stars'.

Thus I found strength to fill two more amphorae: the seventh with long prose fictions of the realistical, the romantical, and the fantastical kind, the eighth with comic histories of my spirit, such of its little victories, defeats, insights, blindnesses, et cetera as I deemed might have impersonal resonance or pertinence to the world; I'm no Narcissus. But if I had lost track of time, it had not of me: I was older and slower, more careful but less concerned; as my craft improved, my interest

waned, and my earlier zeal seemed hollow as the jugs it filled. Was there any new thing to say, new way to say the old? The memory of literature, my own included, gave me less and less delight; the "immortality" of even the noblest works I knew seemed a paltry thing. It appeared as fine a lot to me, and as poor, to wallow like Aegisthus in the stews as to indite the goldenest verses ever and wallow in the ages' admiration. As I had used to burn with curiosity to know how it would be to be a Paris or Achilles, and later to know which of my imagined endings to the war would prove the case, but came not to care, so now I was no longer curious even about myself, what I might do next, whether anyone would find me or my scribbles. My last interest in that subject I exhausted with the dregs of Thalia, my eighth muse and mistress. It was in a fit of self-disgust I banged her to potsherds; her cargo then I had to add to Clio's, and as I watched that stately dame go under beneath her double burden, my heart sank likewise into the dullest deep.

6

A solipsist had better get on well with himself, successfullier than I that ensuing season. Time was when I dreamed of returning to the world; time came when I scattered my beacons lest rescue interrupt me; now I merely sat on the beach, sun-dried, seasalted: a survival-expert with no will to live. My very name lost sense; anon I forgot it; had "Merope" called again I'd not have known whom she summoned. Once I saw a ship sail by, unless I dreamed it, awfully like Agamemnon's and almost within hail; I neither hid nor hallooed. Had the King put ashore, I wouldn't have turned my head. The one remaining amphora stood untapped. Was I thirty? Three thousand thirty? I couldn't care enough to shrug.

Then one noon, perhaps years later, perhaps that same day.

another object hove into my view. Pot-red, bobbing, it was an amphora, barnacled and sea-grown from long voyaging. I watched impassive while wind and tide fetched it shoreward, a revenant of time past; nor was I stirred to salvage when the surf broke it up almost at my feet. Out washed a parchment marked with ink, and came to rest on the foreshore—whence, finally bemused, I retrieved it. The script was run, in places blank; I couldn't decipher it, or if I did, recognize it as my own, though it may have been.

No matter: a new notion came, as much from the lacunae as from the rest, that roused in me first an echo of my former interest in things, in the end a resolve which if bone-cool was ditto deep: I had thought myself the only stranded spirit, and had survived by sending messages to whom they might concern; now I began to imagine that the world contained another like myself. Indeed, it might be astrew with isled souls, become minstrels perforce, and the sea a-clink with literature! Alternately, one or several of my messages may have got through: the document I held might be no ciphered call for aid but a reply, whether from the world or some marooned fellow-inkman: that rescue was on the way; that there was no rescue, for anyone, but my SOS's had been judged to be not without artistic merit by some who'd happened on them; that I should forget about my plight, a mere scribblers' hazard, and sing about the goats and flowers instead, the delights of island life, or the goings-on among the strandeers of that larger isle the world.

I never ceased to allow the likelihood that the indecipherable ciphers were my own; that the sea had fertilized me as it were with my own seed. No matter, the principle was the same: that I could be thus messaged, even by that stranger my former self, whether or not the fact tied me to the world, inspired me to address it once again. That night I broke Calliope's aging seal, and if I still forwent her nourishment, my abstinence was rather now prudential or strategic than indifferent.

That is to say, I began to envision the possibility of a new work, hopefully surpassing, in any case completing, what I'd done theretofore, my labor's fulfillment and vindication. I was obliged to plan with more than usual care: not only was there but one jug to sustain my inspiration and bear forth its vintage; there remained also, I found to my dismay, but one goat in the land to skin for writing material. An aging nan she was, lone survivor of the original herd, which I'd slaughtered reckless in my early enthusiasm, supposing them inexhaustible, and only later begun to conserve, until in my late dumps I'd let husbandry go by the board with the rest. That she had no mate, and so I no future vellum, appalled me now; I'd've bred her myself hadn't bigot Nature made love between the species fruitless, for my work in mind was no brief one. But of coming to terms with circumstance I was grown a master: very well, I soon said to myself, it must be managed by the three of us, survivors all: one old goat, one old jug, one old minstrel, we'd expend ourselves in one new song, and then an end to us!

First, however, the doe had to be caught; it was no accident she'd outlived the others. I set about constructing snares, pitfalls, blind mazes, at the same time laying ground-plans for the masterwork in my head. For a long time both eluded me, though vouchsafing distant glimpses of themselves. I'd named the doe *Helen*, so epic fair she seemed to me in my need, and cause of so great vain toil, but her namesake had never been so hard to get: *Artemis* had fit her cold fleetness better; *Iphigenia* my grim plans for her, to launch with her life the expedition of my fancy. *Tragedy* and *saitre* both deriving, in the lexicon of my inventions, from *goat*, like the horns from Helen's head, I came to understand that the new work would combine the two, which I had so to speak kept thitherto in their separate

amphorae. For when I reviewed in my imagination the goings-on in Mycenae, Lacedemon, Troy, the circumstances of my life and what they had disclosed to me of capacity and defect, I saw too much of pity and terror merely to laugh; yet about the largest hero, gravest catastrophe, sordidest deed there was too much comic, one way or another, to sustain the epical strut or tragic frown. In the same way, the piece must be no Orphic celebration of the unknowable; time had taught me too much respect for men's intelligence and resourcefulness, not least my own, and too much doubt of things transcendent, to make a mystic hymnist of me. Yet neither would it be a mere discourse or logic preaching; I was too sensible of the great shadow that surrounds our little lights, like the sea my island shore. Whimsic fantasy, grub fact, pure senseless music—none in itself would do; to embody *all* and rise above each, in a work neither longfaced nor idiotly grinning, but adventuresome, passionately humored, merry with the pain of insight, wise and smiling in the terror of our life—that was my calm ambition.

And to get it all out of and back into one jug, on a single skin! Every detail would need be right, if I was to achieve the effects of epic amplitude and lyric terseness, the energy of innocence and experience's restraint. Adversity generates guileful art: months I spent considering and rejecting forms, subjects, viewpoints, and the rest, while I fashioned trap after trap for Helen and sang bait-songs of my plans—both in vain. Always she danced and bleated out of reach, sometimes so far away I confused her with the perched gulls or light-glints on the rock, sometimes so near I saw her black eyes' sparkle and the gray-pink cartography of her udder. Now and then she'd vanish for days together; I'd imagine her devoured by birds, fallen to the fishes, or merely uncapturable, and sink into despondencies more sore than any I'd known. My "Anonymiad," too, I would reflect then (so I began to think of it, as lacking a subject and thus a name), was probably impossible, or, what was worse, beyond my talent. Perhaps, I'd tell myself bitterly, it had been written already, even more than once; for all I

knew the waters were clogged with its like, a menace to navigation and obstruction on the wide world's littoral.

I myself may already have written it; cast it forth, put it out of mind, and then, picked it up where it washed back to me, having circuted Earth's countries or my mere island. I yearned to be relieved of myself: by heart failure, bolt from Zeus, voice from heaven. None forthcoming, I'd relapse into numbness, as if, having abandoned song for speech, I meant now to give up language altogether and float voiceless in the wash of time like an amphora in the sea, my vision bottled. This anesthesia proved my physician, gradually curing me of self-pity. Anon Helen's distant call would put off my torpor; I resumed the pursuit, intently, thoughtfully—but more and more detached from final concern for its success.

For just this reason, maybe, I came at last one evening to my first certainty about the projected work: that it would be written from my only valid point of view, first person anonymous. At that moment *Anonymiad* became its proper name. At that moment also, singing delightedly my news, I stumbled into one of the holes I'd dug for Helen. With the curiosity of her species she returned at once down the path wherealong I'd stalked her, to see why I'd abandoned the hunt. Indeed, as if to verify that I was trapped or dead, she peered into my pit. But I was only smiling, and turning on my finger Merope's ring; when she came to the edge I seized her by the pastern, pulled her in. A shard of deceased Thalia, long carried on me, ended her distress, which whooped deaf-heavenward like glee.

TAILPIECE

It had been my plan, while the elements cured her hide, to banquet on Helen's carcass and drink my fill of long-preserved Calliope. And indeed, for some days after my capture I sated every hunger and slaked every thirst, got drunk and glatted,

even, as this work's headpiece attests. But it was not as it would have been in callower days. My futile seed had soured Calliope, and long pursuit so toughened Helen I'd as well made a meal of my writing-hand. Were it not too late for doubts—and I not flayed and cured myself, by sun, salt, and solitude, past all but the memory of tenderness—I'd wonder whether I should after all have skinned and eaten her, whom too I saw I had misnamed. We could perhaps have been friends, once she overcame her fright; I'd have had someone to talk to when Calliope goes, and with whom to face the unwritable postscript, fast approaching, of my *Anonymiad*.

Whereto, as I forewarned, there's no dénouement, only a termination or ironical coda. My scribbling has reached the end of Helen; I've emptied Calliope upon the sand. It was my wish to elevate maroonment into a minstrel masterpiece; instead, I see now, I've spent my last resources contrariwise, reducing the masterpiece to a chronicle of minstrel misery. Even so, much is left unsaid, much must be blank.

No matter. It is finished, Apollo be praised; there remains but to seal and launch Calliope. Long since I've ceased to care whether this is found and read or lost in the belly of a whale. I have no doubt that by the time any translating eyes fall on it I'll be dust, along with Clytemnestra, Aegisthus, Agamemnon . . . and Merope, if that was your name, if I haven't invented you as myself. I could do well by you now, my sweet, to whom this and all its predecessors are a continuing, strange love letter. I wish you were here. The water's fine; in the intervals of this composition I've taught myself to swim, and if some night your voice recalls me, by a new name, I'll commit myself to it, paddling and resting, drifting like my amphorae, to attain you or to drown.

There, my tale's afloat. I like to imagine it drifting age after age, while the generations fight, sing, love, expire. Now, perhaps, it bumps the very wharfpiles of Mycenae, where my fatal voyage began. Now it passes a hairsbreadth from the unknown man or woman to whose heart, of all hearts in the world, it

could speak fluentest, most balmily—but they're too preoccupied to reach out to it, and it can't reach out to them. It drifts away, past Heracles's pillars, across Oceanus, nudged by great and little fishes, under strange constellations bobbing, bobbing. Towns and statues fall, gods come and go, new worlds and tongues swim into light, old perish. Then it too must perish, with all things deciphered and undeciphered: men and women, stars and sky.

Will anyone have learnt its name? Will everyone? No matter. Upon this noontime of his wasting day, between the night past and the long night to come, a noon beautiful enough to break the heart, on a lorn fair shore a nameless minstrel
Wrote it.

Leda 3 ■ Lucille Clifton

a personal note (re: visitation)

always pyrotechnics;
stars spinning into phalluses
of light, serpents promising
sweetness, their forked tongues
thick and erect, patriarchs of bird
exposing themselves in the air.
this skin is sick with loneliness.
You want what a man wants,
next time come as a man
or don't come.

Leda ■ Nina Kossman

She recalled the fear that had overwhelmed her soul,
something had seized her throat so she couldn't cry
out to them, white birds, wild, light, drifting
in the sky which had turned the most remote black.
White birds in black sky, white scream in her throat,
hair splashing the shoulders chased by the awesome bird
hung in hulled air like an ancestor's soul, heavy,
languid, and waiting for an infusion of flesh—
another fill of forgetfulness, heaving,
not hiding her—like a mirror refusing a look
at herself from behind her startled shoulder;
the familiar landscape fleeing from her cry for help,
perhaps at the behest of a god, with his sad immortality,
knowing the images to be thus seized and begotten
from this shivering flesh—wild birds, flying,
no, words, healing ... white and fleeting, up in the lightened sky.

She recalled that alone, she of all women, she,
the mother of the nation of mythmakers, the generation of
myth transforming itself into memory—man
of fire, taking her moistened lips; his voice,
chasing her, has become her children's; light,
gentler than her memory still not in her full command,
lighter, with gentler movements, more tact, less mythology,
the singing without the myth within; in the time
allotted for myth-making—her children singing
in the space allotted for healing music; sounds
that she remembered as the very same ...
One last time they have seized her throat: wild black birds, fly ...

Living Next to Leda ■ Barbara Bentley

i
Leda swore she could hear a swan. I ask you. A swan.
They're supposed to be mute. But she insisted
the noise came across as white sound.
Leda had a nervous tic triggered by
sparrows that twitched in her garden.
She said they flitted about like bits of grit
granted flight. When she got jittery,
she tuned into white sound, more calming
than a tranquilizer. At dusk, she strolled to the park
and watched swans nuzzling in lint-soft wings.
According to Leda, swans have poise.

Not like sparrows. Once, one bashed against Leda's pane.
There were feathers and beads unstrung on glass
like the stuff which sticks to free range eggs.
She couldn't touch it. She cringed. So I put the kettle on
and cleaned it up, while she rocked and focussed
on white sound. For weeks she was calm,
until a sparrow flew in. She had to brace herself
to cup the moth-cased heart. A choke of fluff
and the tickle of spindly legs was still on her palms,
she said, days later, on her way to the park.
Her pockets bulged with bread.

ii
They took her in. Crazy Leda who heard swans
and sat by the lake in the dark
was found in her Hygena-white bedroom,
smothering bruises in an eiderdown quilt
and pillows stuffed with real curled feathers.
I went to visit. She asked for slices of bread
which she crammed in her locker. On bad days
she flew from room to room, chasing something.
Swansong, she said. Poor Leda. A bundle of nerves.
When she crashed into walls, they had to restrain her.

I don't breathe a word of Leda's version:
how a cygnet approached, not in fury
but as an emissary. She stroked angel wings,
and drawn by the flame that tipped the bill,
she entered the jet eye and was transformed.
Whatever happened, it was all hushed up.
She's stabilised now. Soon, there'll be twins.

open-mouthed and insistent for more, more,
while the bastard that did this flies free.

ZEUS AND IO

...to ram,

*Steering her way across the shady groves of Lyrcæa,
And there, cloaked by a sudden thundercloud,
Jove overcame her scruples and her flight.*

*But thoughtful Jove felt the arrival
of Juno's spirit in the air, and changed the girl
into a white-milk cow....*

—OVID, THE METAMORPHOSES, I (TR. BY HORACE GREGORY)

To Io, Afterwards ■ Laurie Sheck

I suppose you are weary now of remembering,
that being mortal you want to convince yourself you belong
to this earth, and are anchored to the earth by love.

You lie by the river. The sky is still.

If you could you would watch the roots of the grasses,
the roots of the wildflowers hunger through the soil,
how they would cleave, as if forever,
to what they cannot finally hold.

The river's skin is cold and smooth.

When the birds fly up, a sudden panic of black wings,
you turn from the strange dream of their going.

I think of your wandering.

White skin, white hooves, how you passed without touching
what formerly you'd stopped to touch.

The children picking flowers by the river
seemed far away as stars. Allowed no rest,

you moved within the stark cage of exile

while you longed more than anything for hands.

Did the earth grow beautiful then—

the lambs sleeping on the hillsides, the olive trees
swaying where they stood?

The world uttered its unstoppable fullness.

And for the first time you saw it. You who watched it
with longing from a distance unbridgeable as death.

Io Remembers ■ Larissa Szporluk

There is no sound at all on this wild upland.

The horses have stopped falling

in their great arc through the air.

The panic that carried their necks over the crag
became, early on, in their legs, regret.

The dark knowing that spoils the morning
enters them now, showing them how,

like a difference in contour, they weren't the real
power of the field. How their bearing was minor,
their bones meaning more to the earth
than what each aloof mane in the wind had been.

Their eyes, which before were clear, crowd
with the fleas madness brings, as she notes

in the noonday heat how each part lies,
spread across rock, like her own in that scene,
half-girl, half-cow, the cloud half off.

ZEUS AND EUROPA

...the Father

*Of all Gods whose right hand held a three-pronged
Thunderbolt, whose slightest nod was earthquake*

*Up to heaven, dropped his royal sceptre and
Became a bull.*

The princess, innocent on whom she sat,

Climbed to his back; slowly the god stepped out

Into the shallows of the beach and with

False-footed softness took to sea, swimming

Against full tide, the girl his captured prize....

—OVID, THE METAMORPHOSES, II (TR. BY HORACE GREGORY)

■ Osip Mandelstam

Pink foam of exhaustion round his soft lips,

The bull violently digs at the green billows,

Not in love with rowing, he snorts—a ladies' man,

The burden is new to his spine, the labor is hard.

Once in a while a dolphin leaps out, arcing,

Or a prickly sea-urchin appears.

Tender hands of Europa, take it all,

Where could a bull find a more desirable yoke.

Bitterly Europa listens to the powerful splashing.

The heavy sea around her is boiling.

Frightened of the water's oily shine,

She would like to slide off these rough slopes.

Ah, how much dearer to her the creak of rowlocks,

The lap of a wide deck, a flock of sheep,