In the winter of 2015, Canadian poet and classicist Anne Carson and her husband and collaborator, Robert Currie, invited me to travel to Luxembourg to witness the rehearsals for and the premiere of Anne’s translation of Sophokles’s tragedy *Antigone*, with Juliette Binoche in the title role and Ivo van Hove directing.

Watching the play five times during those three days in Luxembourg had an unanticipated and devastating effect on me. It’s an unusual thing, to be ambushed by a 2,500-year-old play. In *Antigone*, a teenage Theban princess insists on burying her brother, killed in battle. Her uncle, Kreon, the king, says her brother was a traitor to the state and that his body must rot in the sun for all to see. Antigone sneaks out into the night to fling dirt on the body. For this, Kreon has her walled up alive in a tomb.
Onstage, it felt so immediate it might have been written yesterday: “Look at what these men are doing to me,” Antigone cries, encompassing the plight of the powerless through all of history. Antigone opened my eyes to the constancy of human suffering and said to me, “Nothing changes, nothing ever will.” And this is how I tumbled headlong into despair.

Part I of this book, “Three Days in Thebes,” is in diary form. It details the production itself, focusing primarily on Juliette Binoche’s performance but also on Ivo van Hove’s direction and Anne Carson’s translation. It also covers a time after the play’s premiere when I spent five days in Amsterdam alone attempting to understand both Antigone and the severe depression descending on me.

In Part II, “Handful of Dirt,” Carson, Binoche, and van Hove discuss the nature of their collaboration in a collage interview—that is, I interviewed the three of them at different times and on different continents about the difficulties they had in making their disparate visions of the play coalesce, and then edited the interviews together so it appears as though the three of them are talking together with me in the same room.

When I first interviewed Juliette, she told me that Antigone is one of the roles that “kills actresses.” Once you’ve played her, she’s hard to get out of your head.
Since this was my experience of the character as well, in Part III, “Thinking Antigone,” I look at other writers who were as transfixed by her and by the play as I was: Friedrich Hegel, Søren Kierkegaard, Virginia Woolf, Judith Butler, and Bonnie Honig, the author of *Antigone, Interrupted*.

A brief coda to the book, “Antigone in Autumn,” revisits the play, its star, and its translator near the end of the *Antigone* tour, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Binoche and Carson reflect on the production and its tour, on *Antigone* itself, and on its ultimate effect on them.
PART I

Three Days
in Thebes
Monday, February 23, 2015—Cast Rehearsal

Sealed alive in her tomb, Antigone lies on her bier, black-veiled, black translucent garments drifting down.

Voice clear as a child’s: “I never had a bridal bed I never had a bridal song / I never had the love of children / I’m alone on my insides / and I go down to death though I am still alive / . . . What . . . What . . . Line! Give me the fucking line!”

The prompter supplies it, but Juliette Binoche sits up in frustration. “Why can I never remember this fucking—”

Director Ivo van Hove calls for a break. Lights come up. Some members of his team move about purposefully, others hover over offstage consoles layered with laptops and other technologies.
Juliette appears at our side, swaddled in a long grey terry dressing gown. “And to do this every day,” she says to Robert Currie and me. “Sometimes two times a day! And for five months!” Neither of us has the heart to point out it’s nine months; the tour premieres the day after tomorrow here at the Grand Théâtre de Luxembourg and then moves on to, among other cities, Paris, Amsterdam, London, Edinburgh, New York, and Ann Arbor before closing in late October at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC.

Email from Anne, January 1, 2015

...am listening to Sylvia Plath interview [you sent], isn’t she definite, and what a provoking accent. she makes me want to leave the room. how about you?

last night we went to Into the Woods. Currie loves sondheim. it’s pretty fun although sondheim’s songs all sound the same to me and Meryl Streep’s teeth are depressing. remember the xmas day you and i went to West Side Story?

what are you doing in february? you should come to Luxembourg to the opening of Antigone, perhaps you have tons of airmiles by now.

much love ac
Find a flight on CheapOair for under $600, the lowest fare for any European capital. This should tell me something.

Anne mentioned back in May 2014 that she was translating Antigone. Surprising, because she’d already published a free-spirited version called Antigonick, with hand-printed text (by Currie) and cunning drawings—a po-mo comic book.

summer has begun for me on my porch. that is i’m trying to ignore all aspects of the house that need fixing/cleaning/sorting out in order to start again on Antigone which the director in belgium (Ivo van Hove is his name) didn’t like in its Antigonick version so I shall make a version otherwise. at first this request enraged me then i got interested in attempting to outwit myself as it were. It is very fun.

At the time, I’d never heard of Ivo van Hove, but shortly his name would be legion. In September 2014, his radical reconfiguration of Ingmar Bergman’s Scenes from a Marriage, during which three different casts perform the teleplay simultaneously while the audience moves among them, opened to widespread rapture in New York. His stripped-bare version of Tony Kushner’s Angels in America ran three nights in October at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The theatre’s artistic director said it could have run for months. The
Broadway debut of his production of Arthur Miller’s *A View from the Bridge*—already declared a masterpiece in London—premiered in New York. Word was out that he would be directing David Bowie’s *Lazarus*—a sequel to *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, the 1976 sci-fi classic starring Bowie—in 2015, also in New York.

Saturday, February 21, 2015

Luxembourg, the world’s last duchy—if Browning were alive, he could write a poem about this—perplexes me, geographically, culturally, economically, linguistically, socially. Constantly shifting itineraries meant I arrived the day before Anne and Currie. A brief yet exorbitant taxi ride from the tiny airport delivered me to my aerie, a slab of ’70s concrete where they hand me a big cookie upon check-in. My room looks on to low mountains that begin where the parking lot leaves off.

Restlessness of arrival. The doorman says it’s ten minutes by taxi to the centre of town. And to walk? He laughs: “Hours and hours.” My zigzag descent in sturdy hiking boots takes me through piney suburbs where the houses, painted in dunnish pastels, look vaguely German—sturdy half-timbering here—and vaguely French—a mansard roof there. It’s just like at breakfast this morning—Bircher muesli!—when my fellow
guests greeted me in German or French (though the American middle managers in for an IBM conference offered no salutation whatever as they barrelled toward steam tables stacked high with various forms of pig).

In ninety minutes I arrive at what feels like downtown, or at least touristic Luxembourg, blockish “historical” buildings faced in pale stone or stucco that make up what the locals call Old Quarters and Fortifications—the city was once known as the Gibraltar of Northern Europe—with a belvedere overlooking a deep valley threaded with quaint streams and Hobbit cottages.

I’m on a mission. This notebook’s nearly full. If I’m going to watch three days of run-throughs, rehearsals, pre–dress rehearsal, dress rehearsal, and the premiere—six performances in all—I’ll need more space for taking notes (I’m planning to write a feature about the whole experience for a Canadian newspaper).

Empress Anastasia white gold and diamond tassel pendant at Graal Joaillier.

A stationers? I ask people in the street in various languages. Not here, a man in a nubby tweed overcoat assures me, a lifted eyebrow indicating how preposterous it is of me to ask. This part of the city, I’m beginning to grasp, is for the rich, who live in Luxembourg in abundance in both senses—there are a lot of them and they have a lot. In another part of the city—“Over that way,” a woman with structured hair gestures lazily—ordinary people buy ordinary things for their ordinary little lives.

Eventually I find, tucked away at the back of a tabagie, a couple of shelves of multicoloured notebooks. Except none of them are lined—instead, pages of graph paper in case I wish to chart my daily gains and losses in the global financial market.

After Switzerland, Luxembourg ranks as the biggest tax haven in the world. This is where Kim Jong-il stored his ill-gotten billions. Where Skype and Amazon have moved their European headquarters to evade those irritating corporate taxes less complaisant continental nations insist on.

Frustrated, jetlagged, I taxi back to the hotel. Sixty-five dollars. Too tired to bother with room service, I devour the complimentary fruit plate and the
complimentary chocolate bars as well as a can of almonds and two Rémy Martin miniatures from the minibar. I’m writing this on the back cover of my present notebook. No pages left.

7 p.m. Monday, February 24, 2015 — Pre-Dress Rehearsal

Anne, Currie, and I sit a few rows from the stage, coats and scarves draped over the seats in front of us.

“But this will not do!” Ivo hurries up to us. “I must move you back, you are too close.” Since we are the only spectators in the large theatre, there are 940 more seats to choose from. Ivo leads us back six rows. “Yes, much better.” He darts away, a slight, almost adolescent figure—he’s fifty-seven—in jeans and a navy dress shirt.

“And you won’t be spit upon by the actors,” Martina, the makeup girl, whispers, passing by.

Video of a desert projected across the set’s back wall. A wind machine blows dust and bits of trash across the stage. Melancholy scraping sounds from a cello. Enter the daughters of Oidipous—Antigone and Ismene—orphans of many storms. Antigone brusque, full of urgency, already determined on her fatal course. Their perilous position pre-exists the play: “O Ismene / O one and only sister whose blood intersects my own in too
many ways / . . . what bitterness pain disgust disgrace
or moral shock have we been spared.”

Earlier today this scene played out awkwardly. The
two sisters approached each other across the wide
proscenium stage, embraced, flew apart, embraced
again, circled each other, Ismene retreating, Antigone
advancing, admonishing. It was too much—too height-
ened, too frantic—and distracted from the crucial
information that their brother Polyneikes, because
of the edict of their uncle, Kreon, the king, “is to lie
unwept and unburied / sweet sorrymeat for the lusts
of birds.”

Giving notes afterward, Ivo told Juliette and Kirsty
Bushell, the British actor who plays Ismene, that they
would all need to find “a solution” for the opening scene
before tonight’s dress rehearsal. He spoke softly, look-
ing grey and remote when standing in the shadows,
handsome and shining when he stepped into their light.
He called for a break and the actors wandered off.

Tonight the same scene is ominous, pulsing with
dread. Juliette and Kirsty don’t run around so much.
Less embracing too. The big change is in Kirsty’s pos-
ture. Knees bent, torso canted forward at an unnatural
angle, she becomes an awkward emblem of supplication
as she begs Antigone not to challenge Kreon’s edict.
People don’t stand like this in real life—they’d soon
topple over—but here it provides sharp physical and emotional tension the scene previously lacked.

They exit, taking the desert with them. New video shows people walking in slow motion along a snowy city street. Antigone and Ismene had hastened back and forth on a wide platform raised a metre above the stage—what the Greeks called the proskenion. The action has shifted now to the narrower area between platform and footlights. Kreon and his wordless consort, Eurydike, slump on a black leather sofa. To either side of them, low grey bookcases filled with grey VHS and Betamax tape cases extend to the wings. Grey-garbed men and women—the chorus, here playing Kreon’s courtiers—stand about. A greyscale world and a scene so chilly it feels like a parody of East German experimental theatre of the early ’80s.

After the gale and glare of the prologue, the royal quarters appear stale, as if all oxygen has seeped away. Kreon, head bowed, hands clasped, can hardly bring himself to stir or speak. The whole court looks exhausted, the performers sound under-miked, muffled. They have only recently weathered a civil war. Antigone’s two brothers, Polyneikes and Eteokles (technically she has three if you count Oidipous, both father and brother), were meant to alternate rule of the Theban city-state once their father was forced into exile.
But Oidipous cursed them as he went, surely coals to Newcastle for a pair so stewed in incest, condemning them to enmity. They slew each other, and now Kreon rules in their place. A city close to paralyzed by trauma, a historically traumatized family at its heart. Jokasta, Oidipous’s mother and wife, was Kreon’s sister, Antigone’s mother and grandmother. Jokasta hanged herself, pointedly using the sheets of her marriage bed, at the end of *Oedipus Rex*. Small wonder Kreon so values an orderly peace reflected by an orderly regal family.

When Kreon finally does stir, the production ignites. Belfast-born Patrick O’Kane is not a gestural actor. On the cover of all his scripts, he prints “keep it simple, stupid.” He doesn’t wave his arms about, otherwise gesticulate, or trot out the fussy bits of business lesser actors resort to in order to keep their performances “interesting.” Everything’s contained with O’Kane’s Kreon, the energy wound within him. When he rises from the sofa, it’s a great snake uncoiling, echoed by the slightest sibilance in his s’s. He moves on action verbs, heightening their momentum as he denounces poor dead Polyneikes, “who came back from exile meaning to burn us to the ground / to eat our blood / to throw us into slavery” [emphasis mine].

I’ve never seen on stage or film a more convincing or terrifying embodiment of a man sated by his own
righteousness. Lean, sharp-featured, his head shaved, O’Kane has a slashing presence. The state, for Kreon, stands as the ultimate good. Polarities drive his world. Challenge him as uncle or advisor and you challenge the state; challenge the state, beloved niece or not, and you commit treason. He curls himself round Antigone, attempting to sway her to reason. That failed, he threatens her: “Go down below / and lavish your love on the dead.”

An autocrat, a complex thug, a Rumsfeld.
I hate him on sight.

10 p.m. Monday, February 24, 2015
—Cast Supper Following Pre–Dress Rehearsal

Juliette walks ahead of me, towing her small blue wheelie suitcase along the street. Other members of the cast and crew, as well as Ivo, Anne, and Currie, laugh and talk, but Juliette goes on alone. Must take some time to climb down from that role. I lurk about, trapped in ambivalence. I want to talk to her, but what the fuck would I say? “Like your work!”

At a family-style Italian restaurant, more than a dozen of us settle around a long table. Anne, who’s as shy as I am, prods me along until I reach the last unoccupied chair, directly across from Juliette. She looks
small and isolated, although Ivo’s just along from her. In my head, her face five metres high on a multiplex screen.

I used to interview movie stars and directors for television, and that was okay, because I had a defined role and saw such encounters as challenges. My job was to get these much-interrogated figures to say something they hadn’t already said in a thousand other interviews. Or, failing that, get a rise out of them, preferably on camera. In pursuit of this goal I was adversarial, occasionally aggressive.

With Juliette smack in front of me, I can think of a hundred possible conversational gambits, except they all sound like convivially disguised interview questions, the last thing she needs at an after-rehearsal dinner. The waiter brings a heavy glass carafe of house red and sets it down in front of her. Fixing me with her eyes for the first time, she pushes the carafe toward me: “The man always pours the wine.” My first thought: This retrograde embrace of traditional gender roles is so French. Then I giggle, as I always do when someone expects me to play the Man. (I was so flustered, I don’t remember who ended up pouring.)

The waiter returns with a large platter of grilled vegetables for her. Anne and Currie ordered the flounder, which looks delicious. On the gustatory principle that I try to eat what the locals are having wherever I travel,
I order *Spätzle mit Speck und Käs’*. As a travel journalist, I mainly visit Asian countries, and this approach has served me well there—I end up with strange delectable sea creatures prepared in unusual ways, the occasional live snake, tofu in all its guises. *Spätzle mit Speck und Käs’* turns out to be a kilo of bacon atop two kilos of egg noodles slathered in gorgonzola.

“This is what you ordered?” Juliette looks incredulous.

Ivo looks up from *his* grilled veg. “Now you are the real Luxembourgeois.”

I take a bite. *Glutinous* is too mild a term for what clogs my esophagus. I take a big gulp of wine and say to Juliette, “I teach cinema, so could I ask you one question about film? I promise not to ask another.”

“Yes, of course.”

I tell her that one of the films I often teach—Austrian director Michael Haneke’s *Code Unknown: Incomplete Tales of Several Journeys*—has an early, intensely choreographed scene that runs nine minutes, no cuts. During that time, Juliette Binoche, playing a Parisian actor on her way to a meeting, encounters her boyfriend’s runaway younger brother, buys pastries for both of them, eats her pastry as pedestrians rush along the busy pavement, gives the boy the keys and entry code to her apartment, and rushes off; the boy listens to street musicians and casually insults a beggar
woman; a young black man intervenes and insists the boy apologize; he refuses; they scuffle before a flower stall; Juliette’s character reappears and the police arrive; the beggar has scuttled away, but the police drag her back; the young black man and the police clash. Cut to black.

“How many takes to get that shot right, with all the extras and the traffic and lighting and sound and all the marks you had to hit?”

Juliette smiles. “We did it only three times. One of the tech guys made the same mistake in the same place on the first two takes—Michael Haneke was so furious at him—and then he got it right on the third!” Followed by her familiar gusty laugh.

When I ask if she grew up in Paris, she says she left school at fifteen, “because school was . . .” She screws up her face for a second like a fed-up adolescent trapped in an intolerable situation. Like Antigone. In her free time she paints. “In acrylics, because they dry fast. Oil is too hard to manage. And I draw.” Before I can ask what her paintings look like, Ivo leans in to murmur in her ear.

Anne and Currie, in matching burgundy Uniqlo gilets, are still working on their fish. I’m hungry but unable to get down more than a few forkfuls of my Spätzle.