

Colm Tóibín

# PALE SISTER



Gallery Books

*Pale Sister* was first produced at The Gate Theatre, Dublin, on 31 October 2019, with the following cast:

ISMENE

*Lisa Dwan*

*Director*

Carey Perloff

*Associate Director*

Davey Kelleher

*Set and Costumer Designer*

Jamie Vartan

*Lighting and Sound*

Sinéad Diskin

# 1

In the hour before dawn my sister comes into this room.

Hunted, wounded, she shivers. Her movements darting, then slow and furtive.

There is not a sound.

I do not know if I am afraid.

She turns, her eyes like words. Her gaze pierces the air like a howl.

This is the room where she slept before they found her and took her away.

Silence weighs heavy now like a cave whose mouth has been closed up with stones and clay.

My sister is looking for an opening so that she can find light and cry out. But there is no weak place among the stones; there is no opening.

All the time that she is here she keeps her hands covered.

*Let me see! Don't pull them away!*

My sister's fingers have been bitten, they have been chewed at, they have been gnawed away by her very own teeth. I see the rawness, the flesh purple and strangely white, the dark, caked blood on the stumps, the teeth marks.

And she smiles at me, she is proud, proud that she has not been idle.

She will now face the morning light, unflinching, clear-eyed, knowing that she, when it mattered, made a difference in the world.

She will persist.

But there will come a time when she will be only a memory, a name. Soon there will be no one left in the world who will have heard her voice.

All the others are dead, except one who lies in a darkened room.

I alone can speak, I alone, the pale sister. The witness.

My sister wants me to walk towards the palace and stand in the sunlight staring.

She wants me to accuse the King with my silence.

*Stand and accuse. Stare at him!*

She will speak about what must be done. What I must do. How I must remain still and gaze at Creon, and the gaze must be filled with calm accusation.

*Standing will be enough. Do not move! Just stand. Stand!*

He will be alone with his fear, and there will be many there to see how afraid he is by day as much as by night, how he flinches at a smallest sound.

But he fears silence more than sound.

Outside, in the streets, even by day, no one makes a sound. We live in a time of silence.

*Stand and gaze, that is all I ask, pale sister!*

I lift the lamp towards her and blind her with its rays.

And then she is gone, gone to lurk in the shadows until the first rays of light appear to frighten her away.

But she will come back.

She leaves the air in this room disturbed as though the light itself is infused with her.

Nothing will settle until she does.

And I do not know when that will be.

But she will speak again. Not about her suffering. Or her fear. Or what she did when he threatened her. She will not speak of how foolish she was, or how impetuous, or how brave. Or how right she was.

Yes, maybe that too.

I wake and dream and wake again. In my sleep I am moving towards land, being pushed forward as each wave breaks and then pulled out again until I struggle not to drown.

And then I am in life again. It is morning in this room.

I have been saved. I am the timid one who wants only quietness. I am like the waters on a calm day that come and go and make only a faint and comforting sound. A sound that makes no one afraid.

But when I fade, so will the truth.

And so I speak. That is why I speak.

I live in the strangeness that comes after.

I am grateful for it, as we all are for the thin sun in the morning sky before it becomes fierce and we move indoors away from its hot grip.

We wait again for twilight, for the softening that returns, as the birds dart through the air, feasting on the flies that have grown lazy now, less vigilant.

I am not less vigilant. Too much has happened for that.

I do not know what my sister was.

But I know what she did and what she said. I am alone in knowing that.

I will say what I know.

I will name who was there.

I will name Eteocles and Polyneices, our two brothers.

I will name my sister Antigone who moved between them in the time they had power.

This was her realm, the place of guile and treachery, of plots and of webbed conspiracy. Eteocles held the reins. Polyneices waited for his turn. Between them was dark suspicion, their followers hungry for spoils.

*Whisper to me now as you once whispered of who was most favoured, of what man once banished now returned. The world you walked in was filled with rumours, secrets and spies.*

*I will not take sides, pale sister. I told you.*

Eteocles' men are strutting, gathering their strength.

The men around Polyneices are hungry for power as an animal that is tied when the smell of food is wafting into the air. While the war waged my sister lived in an eternal present. Her arrival here was like a rush of water or wind or sudden rain. She was all movement, breathless with news.

I felt then that I irritated her with my dullness.

*They are my brothers and I will not take sides.*

As my sister spoke her eyes were filled with the shifting energy of fire.