

## JOCASTA

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## I

When she learned the king's power,  
 Jocasta lost delight in being queen.  
 Laius was a cold, dry man. Looking at him  
 brought the image of her baby, his feet  
 pierced and bound, her baby left to die  
 on the mountain slope. They would  
 have no other children.

I remember Laius drunk that night, crying  
 for Chrysippus, the source of his curse.  
 Wanting his boy, he took me instead  
 and threw me on my back to have his way.  
 I am fifteen and afraid to resist  
 and tell myself it is my husband's right;  
 the gods decree a wife obey her spouse.

Sober, Laius recalls Apollo's threat:  
 our son will kill him, beget upon me.  
 Nine months drag like oxen ploughing.  
 With icy eyes Laius watches me swell.  
 I fear the gods and beg Hera, for a girl,  
 but as foretold, I give birth to a son.  
 Laius takes the child to bind its feet.  
 The baby cries, and Laius turns away.  
 He summons a servant and orders me to hand  
 my baby over, threatening me when I cry.  
 The king will keep his own hands clean.

At the public altar, Laius  
 offered bulls and lambs in ritual  
 slaughter. The everburning fire raged  
 so the offerings charred, and Jocasta  
 trembled at the gods' displeasure.

Upon the gates this dawn, a strange creature  
 appeared and woke all Thebes. In raucous voice  
 she cried, "A riddle. Who'll solve my riddle?"  
 At first our people came to gawk, then marvel.  
 Some trembled, children hid their heads and cried.  
 I've heard old tales the minstrels sing of her,  
 but never did expect to really see  
 a Sphinx—part woman, bird, and lion too . . .  
 And what she asks is strange as well: four legs,  
 then two, then three. What can it be? No one

The Sphinx brought pestilence and  
 drought. Rivers and streams ran dry, vines  
 shriveled. But until her riddle was solved,  
 the creature would not leave. On the gates  
 she stayed, her destructive song echoing  
 from empty wells.

My life is a toad. All day and all night  
 the Sphinx. We cannot escape her song.  
 Song! More like wail or whine or scream.  
 Laius is useless as always. Deceitful  
 man, I hate him, hate his touch.

The land is parched; flocks die. Our people  
 haggard, starving, plead to ease their distress.  
 What can we do? Mortals cannot make the rain.  
 I suggest Laius seek Apollo's help.  
 To get away, he welcomes the idea to go  
 to Delphi and proclaims a pilgrimage.

On the sunswept road to Delphi,  
 Laius was killed. The servant reporting  
 the death begged Jocasta to let him tend  
 flocks in the hills. Sending him on his way,  
 she shut herself in the palace.

The prophesy was false. How can that be  
 if gods control all things? For surely chance  
 does not . . . No, no. Yet Laius killed our son  
 and not the other way. That sin diseased  
 his soul. I bless the gods that I,  
 at last, am free.

I dream of my baby night after night.  
 He is dancing for the gods with bound feet.  
 I do not understand how he can dance so.  
 When he jumps, he trips, falling in a heap.  
 The gods just laugh and turn away to drink.  
 I sit ravelling knots. The knots become rope.  
 I wake shaking and muffle my tears in the sheets.

## II

"Man" answered the young stranger  
 whose red hair caught the sun's rays,  
 and the riddle was solved. True to her  
 promise, the Sphinx dashed herself to  
 death. Thebes was free.

Hailing their hero, the people  
elected Oedipus king. Gratefully,  
he accepted the rule and with it the hand  
of Thebes' queen, Jocasta.

85

I see young Oedipus in radiant  
sunlight, Apollo blinding me to all  
but young and vital strength. Deep in myself  
I feel a pulsebeat, something asleep  
begins to wake, as though a dormant seed  
sends up a shoot, opens a leaf. That's how  
Aphrodite touches me. I love this youth.  
My sun, I rise to him and rise with him.

90

From a land of rock and misery, Thebes  
became a bower. Brilliant poppies  
dotted the land. The wells filled, crops  
flourished, and the flocks grew fat again.

95

Before the people's eyes, Jocasta  
became young. Her dark hair gleamed, her  
eye was bright and her laughter cheered  
the halls of the palace.

100

Oedipus has become my Apollo warming  
my days and nights. I am eighteen again  
with poppies in my hair. I am the poppies,  
bright little blooms with milk in them.  
Like them, I seem to spring from rocky ground.  
Like their color and his hair, our love flames.

105

Sweet Aphrodite, you rush through me, a stream  
until you burst like foam that crests the sea.  
Your blessing washes what was once a barren  
ground. I walk among the roses, feel  
your blush upon my cheeks. Oh lovely goddess,  
I send you swans and doves.

110

Thebes prospered these years:  
the gnarled olive bent lower with fruit.  
Lambs frisked in the fields and pipers'  
songs rang through the hills. Jocasta had  
four children. Psalms of joy were sung  
and danced for the gods.

115

With four children, the hours run away.  
Their hunger, games and tears take all my time.  
In bed, with Oedipus, I sleep in peace.  
He was at first my headstrong bull, but now  
he is what a man, a king, should be.

120

I like to see him walking in the yard,  
his funny stiff gait, his hair burnished  
by Apollo's brilliant rays.

125

Mine turns gray but he doesn't seem to mind.  
Our love has brought to me the joy I missed  
when I was young and thought I'd never know.

130

At last, I lay to rest my little boy,  
his shadow vanished now from all my dreams.

## III

Years of plenty at an end, Thebes  
was inflicted with drought. The earth  
burned as crops withered, cattle and  
sheep sickened.

135

While days were once too short, now each one drags  
a slow furrow, the earth heavy with heat,  
lament and prayer. When I go the fields  
the women clutch my gown and plead my help.  
Too many children sicken. The healthy droop.  
At home, the girls sit listless, my sons tangle  
while Oedipus complains his ankles twinge.  
He limps and growls just like a wounded pup.

140

Jocasta, very gray now, walked  
with a more measured step. More than  
a loving wife, she was also counsellor  
to Oedipus.

145

Blaming himself because the land is parched,  
Oedipus frets alarmed he's failed the gods  
in some unknown way, searching within himself.  
In turn, I pray, lighting fire after fire,  
but none burn true. I call on Aphrodite  
and offer her doves, but they flap their wings  
and peck each others' eyes. When I ask Apollo  
to dim his eye, his answer scalds.

150

155

No relief at hand, Oedipus sought  
aid from Delphi. The report came back  
a confusing riddle about Laius' death.  
Suspecting treason, Oedipus feared  
conspiracy against his own throne.

160

Oedipus needs someone to blame. He calls  
Creon traitor, Tiresias false seer.  
I take him in my arms and stroke his hair.  
He tells me what Tiresias has foreseen.

165

I laugh and tell him I too once believed  
that prophesy controlled our lives, that seers  
had magic vision the rest of us did not.

I tell the story of Laius, how it  
was foretold he would die at his son's hand  
and how that baby died when one week old.

170

As I speak I feel so strange, as though my tale  
came from another life about someone else.

My words do not comfort, they flame new fears.  
He relates what drove him from home, tales that he  
would kill his father and bring rank fruit  
from his mother's womb. He fears he has  
been cursed. Dear gods, how can I comfort him?

175

## IV

From Corinth, a messenger  
brought news of Polybus' death,  
the king whom Oedipus called father.

180

You say that Polybus is dead. Dare I  
greet death with joy? Can that be blasphemy?  
My heart flies into song: His father's dead—  
my Oedipus lives safe. His prophesy  
is false. Is false as Laius' was. Oh bless  
your fate, dear love, you need no longer fear.

185

Corinth wished Oedipus to return  
and rule. Fearing he would sleep with  
his mother, Oedipus refused. Nothing  
to fear, the messenger assured. Merope  
was a barren woman.

190

Jocasta began to tremble. Her hands  
rose to cover her mouth.

What's this? What's this? What words do I hear?  
How can I shut his silly mouth, tell him  
Go. Leave. We will not heed your words.  
My tongue stops, rooted in my mouth.  
I look at Oedipus. He does not see  
me watching him. His face is strained, his eyes  
are glaring blue. I try to stop the questions.  
"Oedipus, I beg you, do not hear this out."

195

When Oedipus insisted, the  
messenger told the story of the king's  
infancy—how he, a shepherd then,

205

had helped to save the king's life  
when a baby, a baby with bound feet.

Oh God. Oh cold, gold God. Apollo,  
you chill me. My mind is ice, and I hear  
my mouth say freezing words to Oedipus.  
To my husband. My son. "God keep you from  
the knowledge of who you are. Unhappy,  
Oedipus, my poor, damned Oedipus,  
that is all I can call you, and the last thing  
I shall ever call you."

210

215

## V

Her face ashen, Jocasta rushed  
into the palace, her hands showing her  
the way to her own quarters. She  
ordered the guards to let no one in.  
Ignoring all offers of help, she commanded  
her women to leave her alone.

220

I can't believe. I can't believe. Oh God.  
He is my son. I've loved my son but not  
as mothers should, but in my bed, in me.  
All that I loved the most, his youth that made  
our love the summer sun, wrong, all wrong.  
Vile. He caressed me here and here. And I  
returned his touch. Odious hands. My flesh  
crawls with worms.

225

My God, we've had four children.

230

In her chamber, she looked at her  
bed, sat on it, then jumped up as though  
stung. Covering her eyes with her hands,  
she shook her head back and forth, again  
and again, her body rocking.

235

Oh, Oedipus, what good was our love if  
it comes only to shame? To children whom  
all Thebes can curse? Such children, even ours,  
are rightly damned.

Although we could not know who we were  
and loved in innocence, still we are monsters  
in the eyes of god and man. Our names will mean  
disgrace and guilt forever.

240

Walking to her dressing table,  
she stood before it picking up small  
objects: combs, a gold box, a pair of

245

brooches. Noticing a bracelet given her  
by her father when she was a bride,  
she let forth a dreadful groan.

Oh Laius, Laius, you brought this on me. 250  
My fate was sealed my wedding day. Chrysippus  
was innocent as I; for you this curse  
was uttered, a curse that falls on me. Oh,  
that I must bear the shame, that I must be  
destroyed by your corruption. And our son, 255  
because you sinned, is ruined, damned.

My marriage day . . . what choices did I have?  
As many as the night you came to me.  
The only choice a woman has is that she wed  
accepting what the gods and men decree. 260  
It is not just. It never can be right.

Moving decisively, she walked to the  
doors and bolted them, straining against  
their heavy weight. The women on the other  
side called to her, but again she bade them  
go away. 265

Falling on her knees, she pummeled  
her stomach as though to punish her  
womb. As she did, she called her child-  
ren's names, one name, Oedipus, again  
and again. 270

I thought him buried, forgotten. But no,  
for countless days and nights these many years  
he's thrust himself on me instead. My bed  
once stained with birthing blood is now forever  
stained; what once was love become a rank  
corruption. 275

Rising painfully, sore, she turned  
to the small altar in her chamber.  
Smashing a jar which held incense, she  
began in a voice of char to call on  
Apollo and Aphrodite. 280

As she raised her eyes, she raised  
her fist and shook it against  
the silent air. 285

Apollo, you blinded me to his scars,  
his age, any resemblance to Laius.  
And you, Aphrodite, cruel sister of the sun,

set my woman's body afire, matching my  
ripe years and hungers with his youth and strength. 290  
Paralyzing my mind, you inflamed my heart.

The years I prayed to you and praised you  
were all charade. You so enjoyed my dance.  
We are your fools to trifle with, your joke.

We tremble to question what the future holds. 295  
As though it matters, we think asking will spoil  
our luck, but your injustice mocks all hope.

I hear a chant pounding inside my head.  
Five babies. Five abominations.  
As though a chorus raises call to prayer. 300  
Five babies. Five abominations.

No call to prayer. It is a call to curse  
the gods. No longer will I be their fool.

From her robe, she removed her  
braided belt. As she looped its strands,  
she heard, from the courtyard, a man's  
voice scream in anguish. Undeflected, she  
tied the necessary knots, slipping the loop  
back and forth. Satisfied, she settled  
the noose around her neck. 305  
310

Five babies cursed by heavenly whim,  
cursed in their lives without chance or hope.  
Mothers ought not love their children so.

Gathering her skirts, she climbed  
up on the stool. 315

And wives be more than merely bedside pawns.  
Those who cannot shape their lives are better  
dead.

She stepped onto the air.

### Considerations

1. These paired works, like some of the preceding ones, offer two ways of seeing a story. Sexton, Stevens and Eisenberg have used poetry to reexamine a classical fairy tale, Bible story, and tragic drama. In relative and general terms, comment on who of the three has taken the greatest degree of liberty in departing from the original work, and how. Again, generally, which of the modern versions works best for you? Why?

2. Is "Jocasta" closer to an answer to Oedipus or a retelling of the story? Is it reasonably possible to retell without reseeing and to some degree