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# Oedipus: A New Version

ELLEN MCLAUGHLIN

*(A naked child is lying in the fetal position, his back to the audience.)*

VOICE:

Here is the riddle, mortals:  
What is this thing?  
It moves on four legs in the morning  
Two at noon  
And three at evening.

The answer is as close as breath.  
Tell me or die. One by one.  
Tell me and die. One by one.  
I eat ignorance.  
One, two, four, three, two, three, one, four . . .

*(A cry. The Sphinx's? Oedipus'? A singular, piercing cry of woe becomes a muted communal lament as the Chorus enter from different sides and obscure the naked child. Dawn.)*

CHORUS

Save us. We suffer.  
Save us. We are dying.  
Save us. We walk in confusion.  
Save us. We are blinded by fear.  
Save us. Save us.

*(Oedipus appears. Silence.)*

OEDIPUS

Citizens! You know me.  
My people, my children. I was not sleeping. I cannot sleep.  
I close my eyes and the multitudes of the suffering press  
around me in the darkness. You are always with me. I feel  
your mingled breath on my cheeks, your uncaught tears on

my chest and face. And the smell of the pyres finds me where  
 I lie. I open my eyes and stare into the blackness and think,  
 now, now, now, someone is suffering.  
 So I have come out alone to meet you in the dark.  
 Rise up, my friends.  
 Speak to me. Tell me of your woe.

## CHORUS

O, King. We are frightened.  
 The ship of Thebes is ghosting in alien waters.  
 She is silent, her sails tattered.  
 No one is left on the tilted empty deck.  
 We are dying in the red waves.  
 We have done all we can:  
 Sacrificed and prayed.  
 Atoned for what sins we know.  
 Even now, hordes of the lost kneel at temples across the city.  
 We cling to the altars, like sailors to splinters from a wreck.  
 Blinded by the smoke of our own pyres.  
 Hands empty, we reach toward nothingness.  
 We are suppliants to the silence that lies beyond us.  
 We beg without knowledge of what is killing us.  
 Beg until our voices close in raw silence.  
 But still.  
 But still.  
 But still.  
 The plague stalks us, ravaging the city,  
 And death is everywhere.  
 The bodies of men, women, and children lie like lumber  
 hastily stacked for burning.  
 Every day, more die, faster than we have time to mourn them.  
 And still the pestilence swings wide and blind. Nothing escapes  
 the compass of it. The hills are silent. Birds fall from the sky  
 and lie like so much flyblown fruit. All the animals are downed  
 and rotting, their legs rigid, their eyes open and lightless.  
 In our fields, the crops curl, heads stooped to the gray earth.  
 Every wind rattles the black stalks. Mothers, in agony, bear

corpses. After their labors, they hear only silence, and look upon the curled stones they have delivered in pain.

OEDIPUS

This is what I feared. This is what I knew.

CHORUS

O King. You are the greatest of men.

You are the one who saved us.

It was you who answered, "It is man," to the Sphinx and freed us from her. We remember how it was before you came to us. Still hear her awful scream of prey as she fell upon us one by one. It was you, the Stranger, who released us from the darkness of that terrible time and led us into the light. It was your courage, it was your brilliant mind, that shifted the stone from the black cave we were trapped in. We know you now. We know your strength and power.

Speak to the darkness once more.

Free us again.

OEDIPUS

My children. I see all.

Each of you stands in the single light of your own catastrophe.

I am the night sky. Every burning star exists in me.

A mass of searing pain, countless shining, spinning torments.

My night mind has wandered over all the paths to find a cure.

And I have already acted.

I sent Creon, my brother-in-law and most trusted statesman.

I sent him in my stead to Delphi

to ask the god Apollo what I must do to save my city.

Every day that has gone by has been torture.

I pace this palace like a limping lion.

Watching the light edge across the floor of my cage.

I shift and turn, waiting, impatient, for action.

And always the smoke curls through the bars to find me,

the smoke of the burning bodies of my own people as they  
die one by one, day after day.

It is agony.

It is agony.

CHORUS

Here, here, we are released from doubt.

He is coming, King.

At last.

And he smiles, look he smiles.

*(Creon enters.)*

CREON

Good news! All will be well!

OEDIPUS

What do you mean? How can that be?

CREON

Shall we go inside? You cannot wish to discuss this in the open.

OEDIPUS

Why not? Anything you have to say affects everyone here.

I am not for secrets.

CREON

In the presence of all these people?

OEDIPUS

In the presence of all.

CREON

I had thought to speak to you alone.

OEDIPUS

No, say it to all of us.

I share their suffering. They will share the truth, whatever it is.

Mine is not a solitary fate.

CREON

All right. If that is how you want it done.  
Apollo has spoken.  
He says,  
“There is a corruption.  
Seek it and drive it out.”

OEDIPUS

But we know this. Corruption. We feel it.  
Does the god give us no more help than this?

CREON

It is a man.

OEDIPUS

It is a man?

CREON

It is blood.  
It was a murder. A murder long buried in the body of the  
state. At last, after festering for years, the poison has broken  
to the surface and it wracks the body. It kills us now.

OEDIPUS

What murder? When? Who was the killer?

CREON

It happened before you came here.  
Our late king Laius was murdered.

OEDIPUS

I never knew Laius, never saw him, only knew him dead.

CREON

It is his killer who must be found.  
He is the corruption.

OEDIPUS

But that was years ago. Nothing was done at the time?  
How are those ancient footprints to be traced?

CREON

He is here. In Thebes.

Apollo said it:

“What is neglected lies obscure yet never loses power.  
But whatever is sought can be found.”

He is here. Born of this soil, he stands on it still.

OEDIPUS

The man lives? He is among us?

Tell me of this crime. Where did it happen?

CREON

It was the time of the Sphinx. A time of riddling death and confusion. Laius went out from the city to seek Apollo’s voice, just as you have had me do. He never returned. Nor did his train of followers.

OEDIPUS

There were no survivors? No one who saw this?

CREON

Only one. A slave. And he was so terrified by what he saw that his only wish was to slip away into obscurity and silence.

OEDIPUS

But he must have been questioned. What did he say?

CREON

His terror destroyed his mind. He could remember nothing.

OEDIPUS

Nothing?

CREON

There was only one thing he said he could be sure of.

OEDIPUS

Anything, even the smallest detail, would be better than nothing.

What was the thing he could remember?

CREON

That there were many. Many killers. They fell upon the king's procession, he said, like a hail storm upon a stand of wheat.

OEDIPUS

But killers, a killer, would never attack a royal train alone. No, there must have been real power, here, compelling the crime. No one works singly. The murder of a king is never uncomplicated by larger designs.

CREON

There was talk of this at the time. But we were sunk in confusion. It was chaos.

OEDIPUS

I don't understand you. Your king had been murdered. No investigation could be more important. How could you let the trail go cold for all these years?

CREON

The Sphinx was on us then. We could see no further than her blinding, killing riddle. Until you came and delivered us. And then we were happy to forget.

OEDIPUS

Then it is for me to bring this thing to light.

A killer lives.

Wherever he is, he is a menace.

He is a shadow lurking in wait.

I will bring him to light.  
 Not just for my city but for myself as well.  
 A man who could kill a king and go unpunished  
 Could kill another.  
 Laius' blood sings to my own.  
 I will start at the beginning, all alone.  
 It is time, long past time, to seek the truth.  
 This city shall not die of ignorance.  
 Arise, my people, and pray.  
 Live in hope.  
 I am here.  
 The hunt is on.  
 Whatever is sought can be found.

*(He exits into the palace. Creon exits.)*

CHORUS

A killer stalks the desperate city.  
 A monster, unpunished, lives in our midst.  
 We must drive him out.

We will do our work. It has been shown to us.  
 But, oh gods, we are not equal to all.  
 We are only mortal,  
 and the darkness of our time has overcome us.

Look down upon us.  
 See the harrowing woe of all we suffer now.  
 Death breeding death. Confusion and horror.  
 Pity us. We can only do so much.  
 Help us.

O Shining Ones, we call to you:  
 We sing to the holy siblings,  
 Athena, Artemis and Apollo  
 Ringed with light  
 Ringed with immortality  
 Holy ones  
 We beg you.



Save our city.  
She is clenched in the black jaws of our savage time.  
Those who still live beseech you.

There is a god we cannot honor, though he is  
in your number.  
He is the god the gods would exile from their midst.  
Ares, god of war, Ares, the ruthless, it is Ares who has visited this plague upon us.  
We hear his voice in the roar of the funeral pyres.  
He screams there.  
He is dreadful.  
Sower of havoc.

Great is man, able of mind, heroic and subtle.  
He comprehends the waking world and orders it.  
He can be good, he can be great.

But two things even man cannot outstare.  
Pestilence and war.  
In these Ares resides.  
The god of war breeds chaos and butchery.  
Unleashes anarchy in minds and bodies.  
He stokes the fires of madness, fans the flames of brutality.  
He plunders peace, lays waste to joy.  
The voice of human reason cannot be heard above his  
howls for blood.  
The mind of man is helpless against him.  
It is Ares, the god, Ares, the ravager, who plagues us.  
O Shining Ones, he is too much for us.  
Unseat him, pluck him from his throne and hurl him  
sprawling through the depths of air  
until his scream dies forever.

Man is staggering under his iron weight of woe.  
Drive him out.  
Drive him out.

Drive him out.  
 He is accursed though he is holy.  
 He is holy but accursed.  
 He is accursed though he is holy.  
 Drive him out.

*(Oedipus enters.)*

OEDIPUS

I hear your prayers and they move me.  
 And now I've come to ask you to join me in lifting this sickness from our beloved city.  
 I came as a stranger to this country. I knew nothing of your king's death when I entered this valley for the first time, alone, to meet the Sphinx.  
 But this I cannot do alone. I will need your help.  
 Each of you is the vessel of the history of your city.  
 One of you knows the truth.  
 Where is the murderer?  
 Tell me.

*(Silence.)*

Let him who knows speak.  
 Who is the murderer?

*(Silence.)*

I will not harm the one who speaks. Even he who did this.  
 All he will receive in return for this knowledge is banishment, unharmed. He will go with a king's thanks. Though he has blood on his hands, he will merely leave us.  
 That is all I ask.  
 Who is the man?

*(Silence.)*

Whoever did this thing, whoever lives silent, his crime now poisoning this city, let him know this: He will find no shelter here, nothing will be given to him, no one will pray for him. He has no recourse here, he is accursed.  
 I drive him out, comfortless, into eternal exile.  
 He is the disease. He is the corruption.  
 I speak for Apollo. I speak for my city. I speak this for myself.  
 As far as I cast my eye, even on the clearest day, my power

is absolute. I will find him out. He can no longer shelter in shameful obscurity.

The light of my eyes is searching and, like an eagle, I will plummet down upon him unsuspecting.

My justice is wide.

Whoever he is, I curse him.

Let his days be cruel, burning in nullity and under the lash of hatred. Let his life be long and terrible, leached of any human happiness. Let him find kindness nowhere.

And if I unwittingly sheltered this man, if I have ever offered him comfort, however unknowingly, let this curse fall on me. Let me suffer what I demand in justice. The curse is complete and knows no rank or border. The curse is eternal and binding, no matter where it falls. Let it pursue the guilty unto the gates of hell itself.

A king! A king was murdered!

How could a single citizen sleep while this killer slunk free? I walk that king's very halls, sleep in his bed, share his queen, planted the seed of my children in the same furrow where he could have planted his. I live in his shadow, sleep within the echo of the footsteps of his unquiet ghost. I will fight for him. Fight for him as if he were my own father. I will see all. I will know all.

Nothing will stop me.

CHORUS

O King. May I speak? Your curse has emboldened me.

OEDIPUS

Speak. What do you know?

CHORUS

I know that I was not the murderer. I know that I do not know who was. But Apollo does. He must. Why should we not ask the god to reveal him?

OEDIPUS

The gods have given me my orders. They need not give me anything else. No one can force the gods to say more than they choose.

CHORUS

Might I speak again?

OEDIPUS

Again and again. I am open to all counsel.

CHORUS

If we cannot speak to Apollo himself, might we speak to one who hears him? I'm thinking of Tiresias, whose eyes were blasted blind by the fire of the divine. He withstood that blaze and now he hears the god speaking. Might he be questioned?

OEDIPUS

I have thought of this already and have called for him.  
Called for him twice. I am not used to being ignored when I command.

CHORUS

Look, King, he comes at last.  
See, see, he is ageless, majestic and awesome.  
Woman and man both, nothing human is alien to him.  
Yet though he is mortal, the divine rings in his ears.  
The voice of god hammers in the blackness of his skull and sounds him like a bell.  
With his sightless eyes he stares directly into eternity.  
*(Tiresias has entered. Silence.)*

OEDIPUS

O Tiresias. You are master of mysteries.  
You alone can untie the dreadful knot of our terrible time.  
Your ears are licked by the flames of blazing divinity.  
Your eyes, dead to the passing world, are open to the immortal. You see the truth.

You know the agony of your city,  
you can feel it singing in your own bones.  
We have heard Apollo and he has told us:  
Bring the murderers of Laius forward into the light and cast  
them out.  
O Tiresias,  
Muster all your mystical gifts.  
Let the great work, the noblest work, be yours today.  
No undertaking can be more sublime than to help others.  
Spare nothing in your city's aid.  
We are in your hands.  
Do what only you can do.  
Rescue your city.

*(Silence.)*

TIRESIAS

It is a curse. To know too much.  
Why did I forget this?  
I should never have come.

OEDIPUS

I don't understand you. I called for you.  
I have asked you, humbly, for your aid.  
What do you mean you should never have come?

TIRESIAS

Let me return to silence.  
Let me go home.  
I will live on, you will live on.  
Leave the truth unspoken.  
It would be best.

OEDIPUS

This is a strange cruelty.  
This is your answer to a desperate city?  
To clench your teeth against the voice of god within you?

*(Silence.)*

This is an obscenity.

This silence is an offense against the city that gave you birth,  
the very earth on which you stand.

*(Silence.)*

What more can you want from us?

Do you want us to kneel to you?

This we do.

*(Everyone kneels.)*

We kneel to you, mortal prophet, we bow in supplication.

All Thebes crouches at your feet now.

We are shattered by our troubles,

We kneel in the dust of this dying city,  
dust washed by the hot torrents of our own tears.

Our hands are open to you.

We beg you.

Do not turn away from us now.

A terrible mystery clutches us in its grip.

Holds us fast in torment.

In the name of the gods,

tell us what you know.

Speak.

*(Silence.)*

TIRESIAS

You kneel to me in ignorance.

But I will not deliver you into knowledge.

No. Never. I will not speak.

*(Oedipus leaps up.)*

OEDIPUS

You know and will not speak?

What hateful arrogance fuels you to refuse such frank sup-  
plication?

You'd enrage a man of stone!

You are heartless and insolent.

You have betrayed us, the dead and the living.

Speak, damned monster, speak!

TIRESIAS

I withstood the blaze of god, I can withstand this tantrum.

All I say to you, Oedipus, is: look to your own heart,  
turn this fury to the source of your present pain.  
I am not your scourge.  
Put your own house in order before you try to dismantle  
another's.

OEDIPUS

You are speaking to your king. When you insult me, you insult  
your country. Beware.

TIRESIAS

I am not your subject, Sir, nor any man's. I belong to god.  
I do not speak because there is nothing for me to say.  
What will happen will happen. Truth does not need prophets.

OEDIPUS

All the more reason to speak then. If it doesn't matter what  
you say, what prevents you doing your king's bidding?

*(Silence.)*

Practice your trade, prophet. Your king commands you.

TIRESIAS

Rage, Oedipus, rage. It is useless. Wind across a wasteland.  
I will not speak.

OEDIPUS

Yes, you shall have all my fury, and let the force of it wake  
your leaden conscience. Let it whip the dust from your  
buried infamy, lay it open in the air and read it in the noon  
day sun. This is what your shameful silence has led me to  
believe: It is guilt that seals your faithless mouth. A king's  
murder is on your eyeless head. A king's murder. Whether  
you raised your hand or not, you had a part in it, this I  
now know.

TIRESIAS

What you know, what you know. Fool. Bloodstained fool.

Ignorant as an animal of your own crime.

OEDIPUS

What? Now you slander me? You're smart enough to know what you're doing. This is outright treason. I could have you killed for that. Where is your fear?

TIRESIAS

Why should I fear you? The truth is all my safety. And I live in the shelter of it.

OEDIPUS

Who are you speaking for? Is it Creon? Whose devices are you working, twisting the truth to suit your master's needs?

TIRESIAS

Blame yourself if you must blame someone for this. I warned you not to force these words to light, but you wouldn't listen. It was you who compelled me to speak, Sir.

OEDIPUS

Then at least be clear, traitor. No more riddles. Indict yourself and be done with it.

TIRESIAS

All right then. Listen.

This is the truth you bully me to utter, against my will:

You do not know the shame you live in. You are steeped in pollution. You swim in it, wallow in your own filth and know nothing. Nothing.

You are the corruption that has brought a curse down upon your people. Thousands have already died for your ignorance. Yes, the royal hunt is on, but you, Sir, are your own prey. You are the man you're hunting.

OEDIPUS

Say that again.



TIRESIAS

The murderer you seek is here. He is you.

*(Silence.)*

OEDIPUS

How dare you speak of truth? How dare you claim the protection of your rank? You know nothing of the truth. You are blind. You rattle in blackness inside your unlit skull and lie and lie. I see you for what you are at last. You live in darkness.

TIRESIAS

O, deluded king. I could almost pity you. You who have eyes, but see nothing. You who will be blind, you who will be a beggar, tapping into exile for the rest of your days. It will not be long. It will not be long before your curses shower down upon your own head. Think of me then, as I shall think of you. And smile at your dead ignorance.

OEDIPUS

Designs and deception. My eyes are adjusting to the murk of this high treason. You know nothing of god. Your only allegiance is to Creon. He is behind this, I see it now, only he could have goaded you to spew this grotesque slander. I have been a fool to trust him. He has always envied me my power. How could he not? I finally see him for what he is, with this long brewing conspiracy, his backstreet machinations. And you were always his flunky, weren't you? You stood beside him from the first, mouthing what he bid you to say. When have you ever been a true prophet? When Thebes teetered in crisis in the dark days of the Sphinx, did you come to the aid of your suffering city with all your mummery? No. You two formed a cabal to topple your country entirely with the murder of a king. I was the unexpected savior who wrecked that plan with my arrival. It was left to me, a stranger, to defend your city. I, whom you call ignorant. I alone matched my mind against the mystery. And I did it without any of your

hollow sorcery and cant about god. I didn't need to disembowel birds and finger their blue guts to do what was right.

CHORUS

O King, you go too far! This is dangerous insolence!

OEDIPUS

This wanderer, from parts unknown, walked into chaos empty-handed and defeated it with nothing but a human mind. Now, in your country's second moment of peril, the two of you seek to carry through on your original plan by fanning the flames of fear, you seed your great sorrowing city with the infection of this evil suspicion of a beloved king. But you have underestimated your city and you have underestimated me. This is where the trail of infamy ends.

Of course I have found you out. It was just a matter of time. What did you expect me to do?

TIRESIAS

Just this. What you have done. You cannot help yourself, you are what you are. You have always been a stranger, it's true. But not as you think. A stranger to yourself.

You do not know yourself, Oedipus. Even who you are. Never having sought this knowledge, I know. You do not. Whose son are you? Ask yourself that.

OEDIPUS

Whose son am I? What do you mean?

TIRESIAS

Today you will find out.

Today is your birth, your mother and your father.

And today you will finally meet the real stranger.

Today he will kill you.

OEDIPUS

Leave with your life, and never cross my path again. I won't

waste my time with you again. I will deal with Creon, your taskmaster. You are not worthy of even the back of my hand.

TIRESIAS

I'll leave you with a riddle, King, and be gone. You're fond of riddles, and you're good at them. No one better. It is your killing gift. As you will see. Let this suffice:

What is that thing which, once born, eats its own father, then climbs back into the womb from which it came and sleeps there in bloody ignorance?

OEDIPUS

No more of your riddles, monster. Leave my sight.

TIRESIAS

I leave your sight forever, King. No, you shall never see me again. Though there will come a time when you will weep for the sight of me. Even me. But I will not come. Even you will not be able to bid me to your sight again. Nor anyone else, King.

Never again.

*(He leaves.)*

CHORUS

O King. This was not done well. The voice of god has left us in anger. Rage crackles in the raw air, spreading terror through the miserable streets. Now is the time for temperance and reverence. Now, more than ever, we need the tender glance of the divine. Without it we are lost in mortal turmoil and confusion.

OEDIPUS

That blind schemer has nothing to do with god and never did. He has just fooled you with his sanctimonious charades for years. We are well rid of him. It is good he has gone. Now I can think.

Rejoice, my people, your savior has returned to himself. Never again will he seek in others what he need only find in

himself.

All you need of the divine is here. The mind of a leader, searching, searching, moving swift as thought, unencumbered by superstition and fear. My whole life has drawn me to this moment.

I am keen as a knife edge now, free in my knowledge.

I will act.

*(He leaves.)*

CHORUS

Listen to the running footsteps.

A killer runs.

In his head the blood is drumming.

“Seek him out.”

Running, running, he gets nowhere.

Desperate, jagged is his flight.

Still the voice of the god pursues him,

“Seek him out.”

Panting up the slopes, he scrambles.

Printing blood on every rock.

In the aching air he hears it

“Seek him out.”

No one, no one, can outrun the voice of god.

Look up, murderer, look up.

The Fates are circling.

They have found you.

Soon their shadows will rush cool across your shoulders.

And in an instant, they will fall.

Flickering silence, they will fall.

Wind in black feathers, they will fall.

They will cut the thread.

This is what god said.

They will cut the thread.

Welcome to the dead.

No one, no one, can outrun the voice of god.

Under the white shafts of the holy sun  
We all dodge and run across a broken land  
Under the gaze of god's unblinking eye.  
And all that is mortal shall die.

There is no hiding from the fates circling above us.  
Every man shall feel the plummeting shadow of his death  
spread across his back.  
For all that is mortal shall die.

I cannot place my faith in prophets,  
For even the best of them walk beneath that flickering light.  
Just as I do, just as I.  
No one can outrace that hovering shadow.  
For all that is mortal shall die.

I have a king  
and though he too is mortal, he is great.  
When he faced that singing terror  
When his brilliance drove her from our land  
Then we saw our dreams embodied  
Then we saw the best of man.

I can't abandon  
Won't desert him  
Not this king I've come to love.  
He's the only hope that's left me

As the Fates hang up above.

There they are hanging  
 clicking their scissors  
 one two three  
 they bide their time  
 making slow circles  
 in wait for me  
 clicking their scissors  
 they flap and climb  
 clicking their scissors  
 watching me running  
 riding the currents of timeless time.

*(Creon enters.)*

CREON

Citizens, I come here in disbelief and shock.  
 Can it be true? Can Oedipus have accused me of such—I  
 can't even say it—is it possible?  
 As I made my way here through my beloved city streets,  
 streets I have walked with honor all my life, rumors mur-  
 mured in my wake. Everywhere I turned, people cupped  
 their hands to speak of me to others, or stared at me in stony  
 silence as if I were a stranger.  
 This is a kind of nightmare.  
 No slander could ever cut as deeply as this.  
 Nothing worse could ever be said of me.  
 And from *him*, my brother, the man I've served loyally all  
 these years.  
 Can this be?

CHORUS

Lord Creon. Our king is distraught. He did strike out, and  
 like a child, hit the one who stands closest to him.

CREON

He actually said this? That I compelled Tiresias to lie?

CHORUS

He did.

We heard him. But we cannot speak for his intentions.

CREON

So the rumors are true. This was his accusation. I couldn't believe it.

CHORUS

Lord Creon, his words were spoken in fury, not in consideration.

CREON

The shame. How can I outlive this?

CHORUS

But we needn't speak for him. He is here.

*(Oedipus has entered. They stare at each other.)*

OEDIPUS

You. Sir. That you can stand before me. Brazen and unbowed.

Oh, look at him. What a performance.

All sanctimony and innocence. You are good, I'll give you that.

You have taken me in for years. But no more.

It is your king, not your fool, who is looking at you now.

CREON

You have judged me without hearing me, Sir.

This is no justice. I have a right—

OEDIPUS

—What right can a man like you claim in such an hour?

CREON

I have a right to know what I'm accused of.

OEDIPUS

First tell me of your dead king. Be useful to me in this if nothing else.

CREON

My dead king? You mean Laius? I don't understand.

OEDIPUS

Then I will make you understand, Brother.  
How long ago was his murder?

CREON

You don't need me to tell you that, it's common knowledge.  
Not long before your crowning. The crime is old. A year  
older than your oldest child.

OEDIPUS

A dark time. A time of crisis.  
Yours was the hand at the helm. But you had help, even then,  
from your minister of smoke. Didn't he stand by your side?

CREON

Minister of—? Who do you mean, Sir?

OEDIPUS

The blind one. King of Cats.

CREON

Tiresias?

OEDIPUS

Yes.

CREON

He was by me, yes, my trusted aid through evil times.



OEDIPUS

And evil times need their professionals. What a sorry state you were in. First the Sphinx preyed upon you, feeding one by one upon the people. Then the murder of a king. Almost more than a country can bear.

I am curious. It puzzles me. Why was there no inquiry into that crime? Why was no one tracked, no one brought to justice?

CREON

But I have told you this already. We could get no answers. All were dead. Or so we thought. Only one survived and he was so blasted by terror that nothing could be wrung from him. He staggered into the city, wild with horror, weeks later, just in time to see you crowned. He went speechless from the shock of all he'd seen.

OEDIPUS

So many speechless, so many silent. Odd when there is so much to tell. Odd too, your wise man's silence. He who says he hears the gods. He had nothing to say? Why was that?

CREON

I don't know.

OEDIPUS

But you know much.

CREON

What do I know?

OEDIPUS

You know for whom Tiresias has always spoken. It is not the gods he listens to. He does not work for them. It's politics, not god, that murmurs in his ear. And he works for the man who pays him. He works for you.

CREON

Me?

OEDIPUS

You were the one he spoke for today. He played his part in your plot beautifully. After your false oracle laid the ground, he named me as the murderer. The killer of a king.

CREON

If that is what he said, he said it for his own reasons. I had no hand in it. What would it profit me? (*Oedipus laughs.*) I'm serious. I have never sought it, never wanted kingship with all its troubles and weight of care—

OEDIPUS

—All its power—

CREON

—I have power enough. Power on my own terms. I have only ever wanted what I have.

I have rank, through position and blood. The queen is my sister, you, then, my brother. I have sway, entrance to any majestic hall I choose to enter. I am fawned upon, but never held ultimately responsible. Favors, tokens, prayers and benedictions reach me on their way to you. I bask in your reflected light. I do not need to shine perpetually and, like the moon, I can be as changeable as I choose. No one relies on my warmth or my steady light.

I am liked because I am not feared.

I am liked because I never have to stand the final test of my mettle.

I prefer it so. It is an easy, comfortable life and I sleep long and soundly.

Treason? It is not in my nature.

I know who I am. I am content. I am the moon.

Do not mistake me for something I am not.

OEDIPUS

The moon is subtle, untrustworthy and devious. It dips behind clouds to plunge the world into darkness when it sees its moment. If you are the moon, I know your tricks.

CREON

I have not lied to you, King. Think through this rash injustice. If you must pursue this, at least do one thing first. Ask at the shrine of Apollo if the message I brought you was the one the god imparted. Then, if you insist on accusing me of conspiring with a soothsayer, I will account for myself in a due process of law. And if I am still found guilty, this I promise you right now: If you let me choose my own mode of death, it will be far more terrible than any court could devise. This crime you tag me with is that hateful to me.

OEDIPUS

Oh, but you are cunning. You want me to falter in the pace of this inquiry. Run to temples, drag through a trial. No. I'm sure you have covered all your tracks. There is no time for this. The city is in crisis. Such wicked doings must be stamped out as quickly as possible, or else the spark will blaze into a consuming wild fire. Is that all you have to say?

CREON

No, King. There is more. If I have only this moment to speak in this mad pelting race to ruin, I will say this:

Since I stand accused, I accuse you in turn. In my own voice. Face to face.

You have done me two injuries. The first is a petty, dreary crime: the crime of slander. You have done me harm in the eyes of men and that matters to me, it stings, and all the more deeply since it is provoked by a wild falsehood. But your second crime is unforgivable in one so freighted with honor as a king: you have mistaken a good man for a bad one. This shows want of character, want of judgment, want of common sense. I am your friend. I am your kin. I am your ally, none

more steadfast, none more true. And this is how you treat me? Better to slash off your right foot and fling it in the mud. It is madness.

I have stood by you for years. Time has proved me. You should have known me better.

CHORUS

Listen to him, king. An honorable man is speaking. Rise above your anger and hear the truth. Nothing is gained by rashness.

OEDIPUS

If it is rash to act quickly in the moment of inspiration, and in the swiftness of thought to take the challenge, then I have rashness to thank for my every accomplishment.

My success has been the child of the lightning pace of my perception.

Quick with the Sphinx.

Quick with traitors.

Quick to grasp and quick to act.

Your city was saved by the speed of my thought.

I do not wait for knots to tighten.

I cut the knots before they're tied.

And to this your city owes its life.

CREON

Quick then, reckless king. What will you do to me?

Banish me?

OEDIPUS

And let you wait out another string of years in darkness until your moment comes again? I know better this time. No. Death.

Quick justice. Quick death.

CREON

Think, King. Do not race to error. Act your part.

If you must judge me, be judicious.  
Give evidence. State your case.  
What have I done?

OEDIPUS  
You are a traitor.

CREON  
So you say. You are a man.

OEDIPUS  
I am a king.

CREON  
You are a man. You could be wrong.

OEDIPUS  
I am not.

CREON  
And if you are?

OEDIPUS  
I am a king. And a king must rule.

CREON  
Not for long if he rules unwisely.

OEDIPUS  
Do you hear this, my city?

CREON  
It is my city too. That you haven't taken from me yet.

CHORUS  
Sirs, sirs, stay your wrath before you break us in two. This is not right. Ah, but here is order and calm. Let the queen come

between you and return you to yourselves.

*(Jocasta enters.)*

JOCASTA

What is this mad clamor? Have you forgotten yourselves? Have you forgotten your city? Is this a time to be shouting in the streets in some petty dispute? When your people are in anguish? Shame on you. Think! Think of who you are. Oedipus, come inside. Brother, leave us.

CREON

Sister. Your husband here just condemned me to death.

JOCASTA

What?

OEDIPUS

I did. This man has plotted against my life.

CREON

Never! You know me, Jocasta, you know your brother's nature. Is this thing possible? You saw the dread in my eyes when you were made a widow, those dark days when I thought the crown would come to me. I never wanted it. You know that, Sister. This is the truth. I stand here, before my gods and my people, and I swear it.

Let me be damned, may the gods destroy me, if this is not the truth.

JOCASTA

O Oedipus, believe him. He lays himself open to the infinite power of the beyond. His words are sanctified by this nakedness. For your own sake, for the sake of your people, believe him.

CHORUS

Believe it, King. Give way to reason.

Temper your rage.

OEDIPUS

I have caught this wickedness with my own hand.  
I feel it writhe in its captivity. Why should I loosen my grasp?

CHORUS

Loosen, release. Open your hand. Have mercy.

OEDIPUS

Do you know what you're asking?

CHORUS

Yes, King.

Creon has sworn his innocence before the blazing eye of god.  
Hear him. Honor that vow. He is your kinsman. Don't cast  
him off.

He is unworthy of such disgrace. Yours would be the betrayal.

On your head, the crime.

OEDIPUS

Let me be clear then. In asking for this, you ask for my death.

CHORUS

Never, by the sun itself, never do we wish for that.

O King, remember your city. Thebes is dying, life by life.

And now this fury between you sickens us further,  
drags us under the bloody waves. Release us.

Let him go.

OEDIPUS

If that is what you want, so be it. I release him, though it may mean my destruction. I do it for you, out of pity for you, not, never, for him. He has my undying hatred, let him track it like soot with every footstep for the rest of his days.

CREON

If this is what you know of mercy, may you never be in need of it. Yours is a terrible nature, Brother. I would not have it for the world. Your great head is a locked box where you nurture grievance and shadow, startled by the echoes of your own frantic whispers coming back to you. Your reckless fury crackles like lightning through all your dark rooms. No, I don't envy you, and never did, for all your power.

OEDIPUS

Get out of my sight.

CREON

With pleasure. The world knows me, though you do not.  
*(Creon leaves.)*

CHORUS

Lady, why do you wait? Take him inside and comfort him.

JOCASTA

Not yet. I will know first what happened here.

CHORUS

This poisoned time breeds suspicion and malice in the troubled air. They breathed it and fell upon each other.

JOCASTA

Both? They were both to blame?

CHORUS

There was injustice on both sides, anger on both sides.

JOCASTA

What did they say?

CHORUS

Enough, Lady, we are sick of words.  
We reel and stagger in misery.



Calm your raging king.

OEDIPUS

I hope you're satisfied.

Blunt my righteous anger and see where it gets you.

Glory in your ignorance, enjoy your make-believe peace.

CHORUS

King, do not mistake us, we are your loyal subjects,

we cling to you, our only pilot in this storm of blood—

JOCASTA

—I must know. What happened here?

CHORUS

Let it rest, Queen. Nothing can be served by—

JOCASTA

—I will not let it rest. My brother has been banished.

I have a right to know what could have warranted such disgrace.

OEDIPUS

Yes, he is your brother. And I am your king.

He is guilty of high treason. I have been accused, here, in front of all, of murder.

JOCASTA

My brother said this?

OEDIPUS

O he's too smart for that. He sent his soothsayer in to do the dirty work.

JOCASTA

Tiresias?

OEDIPUS

Yes. He said I killed Laius.

JOCASTA

The prophet said this?

OEDIPUS

In front of all.

JOCASTA

But this means nothing.

Prophets and prophecies . . . they spawn nothing but mayhem and misery. I have learned this too well. The scars of that lesson still burn across my beating heart. It is prophecy I have to thank for my greatest sorrow, my deepest regret. I will tell you a story I have buried in memory. All the years of our happy life together, I couldn't bear to think of it. But I'll tell you now and let you judge for yourself the truth of prophecies.

When I was first married to Laius, I had a child, a boy. That unlucky creature I never knew. He was born with open eyes and we stared at each other in amazement. He lay on me and I kissed his smooth feet, feet that had never touched earth. Three days I had him, that was all. On the third day, a vile prophecy was delivered to us. Not from god, you understand, just some old charlatan, jingling charms, but it was enough to wreak havoc. This child, this wide-eyed, wordless stranger I held in my arms, would be his father's murderer, the prophet said. The utter horror of it. Laius believed him. Panicked, he wrenched the baby from my breast and gave him over to the winter night to do its work. The last time I saw my child, he was curled naked in his father's arms, staring up at him in confusion, one tiny hand splayed above his father's thundering heart, as if to calm it. It was brute fear that killed that child. To trust that prophet was a terrible sin. No man can speak for the gods, no man can speak for the future. Nothing could be clearer—just look at what happened. For all his lethal caution,

some group of men he never knew butchered Laius at a crossroads. Fortune tellers lie. And those who believe them are fools. Criminal stupidity. And I didn't have the strength to stop it. I let my child be taken from me, let them fling his life away on the bare rocks of Citheron as the winter night howled his tiny bones to ice. I have so little of him, just three days, nothing to remember. Only the glitter of his open eyes. When the nights are darkest, when the cold moves in, I feel the glint of them on me and I shudder for what he suffered, what I didn't save him from.

My unlucky stranger. My king, why do you shiver?

OEDIPUS

A crossroads, you said.

JOCASTA

That's where the murder happened, so they told me. A place where three roads meet.

OEDIPUS

Oh god, oh god, the light. This is all too clear. I have cursed myself.

JOCASTA

What is this terror? Tell me. How has this story upset you?

OEDIPUS

Where is the man?

JOCASTA

What man?

OEDIPUS

The one who survived. Who saw it. Who couldn't speak?

JOCASTA

The slave? He's off in the mountains, a shepherd, I think. He

asked to be released from the household when he returned in the first great days of your reign. It seemed a small thing to grant, after all he'd been through.

OEDIPUS

Could he be found?

JOCASTA

Probably. He's not far from the city. No one has spoken to him in years, but we know where he is.

OEDIPUS

I must see him. I must see him.

JOCASTA

And so you will, if you want to. But talk to me. Tell me what makes you shake. I've never seen you like this.

OEDIPUS

The terror courses through me again, that familiar fear. I lived under its shadow so long I grew used to it, I could almost forget it. But I feel it once again, darkness hovering.

JOCASTA

Tell me, my love, tell me from the beginning.

OEDIPUS

I will. Who better than you to tell at last?

My father is Polybus, king of Corinth. His queen, my mother, is Merope. They raised me as a prince of the land and my days were easy and bright until something happened. Perhaps it was a trivial incident, perhaps I shouldn't have treated it as I did, but I am what I am, and I did what I did.

JOCASTA

What happened?

OEDIPUS

I was at a banquet. It had reached that pitch in the evening when noise and chaos were overtaking the party. Someone I didn't know, a drunk, yelled something, a wild insult, I almost didn't hear it above the din. But I did. He jeered that I wasn't the son of my own parents. Another man would have let it go, the brute was red-faced, spittle flecked his lips, he was blind drunk, but it shook me.

The next day, I went to my parents and told them of it. They were shocked and outraged and told me to put it out of my mind. But I couldn't. The insinuation curled inside my brain and fed there like a worm on moss. I left after dark, telling no one, traveling light, and walked all night, walked all day until I reached Apollo's shrine. I asked the god: "Whose son am I?" Silence. The god wouldn't speak to me. Priests tried to send me away. "If the god won't tell you, it is not for you to know." But I wouldn't leave, just crouched there, my back against the damp walls, and waited, I don't know how long it was, for an answer. I was alone with the mouth of god, listening, the dripping in deep caverns, the long silence. I could wait. Then there was a rumble, the hiss of steam, I stood for it and at last it came, the divine rock spoke, a keening, eerie cry. Worse, worse, than anything I could have imagined. There in the darkness I heard it, "You will kill your father. You will breed with your mother to spawn a host of monsters." I ran, ran for the light, ran in panic, across a wilderness I did not see. All I knew was that Corinth was behind me and I was fleeing it, running north, never to see it again. Never to see my dear parents again, running from the country I knew into the world I did not. I would be an exile for the rest of my life. That was all I knew. Feet bleeding with every step, I lived by the north star. Across mountains and through forests I trudged, never looking back. Until one day at noon, I came to a crossroads, a dismal, forked place, overarched with twisted pines, near a river that trickled through sucking mud and reeds. Three roads met and mine was the north one.

And as I reached the crossroads a carriage came barreling

down toward me, the driver whipping his horses and cursing at me to give way. I would not. And then I saw the man sitting behind him, an older man, wielding a long pike. This he thrust at my head, his eyes flashing with malice as he struck at me. I can see him still. The blunt stake darting toward my eyes. I saw blood. I wrested that pike from the old man's grip, swung it at his head and toppled him from his seat. He fell hard into the dust and lay still, staring up, unblinking. Then the driver, I beat him to death with his own whip, then everyone, every single one of them. I was lit with rage, unstoppable, like a wild fire leaping up the dry brush of a mountainside. Until I was left in silence once more, standing on blood.

O my queen, I have cursed myself, done this thing. I murdered a king, I know it. Then, like a thief, rolled in my victim's bed, laid with his wife, stole his kingdom. It must be so. And all to outrun a prophesy that has hung over my head all these good years. That, at least, I have evaded, nothing could be worse. But still, I am a murderer. I am the thing I cursed. "Let him have nothing, no word, no comfort, no prayers. Cast him out from this suffering city and cleanse it with his absence."

I am the corruption.

Back, back, to exile, Oedipus, you have no home again.

CHORUS

O but king, let us hear the shepherd.

You remember, sir, there is some hope.

OEDIPUS

You're right, I can live in that.

Until he comes I can live on that hope.

JOCASTA

Hope?

OEDIPUS

The only thing he remembered, the only fact he uttered was

that there was more than one killer, more than one.

JOCASTA

He said that. That's true. Said it more than once, it was all he said. It is on record. The only eye witness. You see it will come out all right. Calm your fears, my love. And as for prophecies, you know my mind on them. My dead king's killers prove it, my baby, dead for all these years, proves it. These things cannot be told. These things cannot be known. Believe me.

OEDIPUS

I believe you. But call the shepherd. I will not rest easy until I look him in the eye, hear it from his own mouth.

JOCASTA

Yes, yes, we'll send at once. But let's come inside, away from the heat of the day, the sounds of the tormented city, the smell of the pyres. You must rest.

*(They exit into the palace.)*

CHORUS

Gods, are you listening? Gods are you there?  
Is there nothing higher than us?  
Is there no law greater than what we cobble together with  
our own human hands?  
Is there no shining order, no light of divine reason?  
Are we alone in this shimmering silence?  
Is there nothing eternal?

Is there nothing here that will not die?  
Where are we to seek the truth if not in you?  
If nothing, nothing is sacred  
Why tell the story? Why sing? Why dance?  
Without god, we are just beetles  
scrambling, mindless, over rubble.  
And the world of men  
nothing but tyrants and fools  
shaking their sticks or rattling their chains

from pointless birth to pointless death.  
 Nothing matters if all we thought was true  
 has only been a lie.  
 The ground is strewn with blood and bodies and there is  
 nothing but heat in the vault of the sky.

*(Jocasta enters.)*

JOCASTA

God. I am unused to calling for you.  
 But an old grief has risen from the waves of memory  
 where I buried it so long ago.  
 They bound your legs together and flung you into black ob-  
 livion and forgetfulness.  
 But you have risen again and found me here.  
 And guilt surfaces with it.  
 The crime I didn't prevent.  
 Innocence murdered.  
 My baby. Your eyes shine in wordless terror once again.  
 O the loss. O the loss.  
 The world is in blank confusion once more.  
 My husband is a stricken stranger,  
 haunted by ghosts.  
 His great mind shreds itself in this new horror.  
 The familiar scent of disaster is in the air.  
 And here I am again.  
 Stopping nothing, helping no one.  
 Once again my love is useless  
 As fate rumbles toward me, bearing down.  
 I stand at this crossroads and wait.

*(The Corinthian Messenger arrives.)*

MESSENGER

Good news. All will be well.

*(Silence.)*

Where is King Oedipus? I have news of great moment.

JOCASTA

You speak to his wife and mother of his children.



MESSENGER

Blessings on you, queen, and on your house.  
Blessings always.

JOCASTA

That is kind. We are in need of them.  
Where do you come from?

MESSENGER

Corinth.

JOCASTA

And what is the news?

MESSENGER

Your husband is exalted. And though there is some sting to  
his triumph, it is slight—it is in the nature of things.

JOCASTA

What do you mean?

MESSENGER

King Polybus is dead. The throne belongs to Oedipus.  
(*Jocasta laughs.*) My lady?

JOCASTA

(*To the gods*) Such a swift return for such a meager prayer?  
I thank you.

MESSENGER

I am out of my depth.

JOCASTA

Prophecies, prophecies, all of them hollow as babies' rattles.  
(*Oedipus enters.*)

My king, I am confirmed in my confident scorn, listen to  
what this man has to say.

MESSENGER

I bring you news, king, of bitter joy. King Polybus is dead.  
Yours is his vacant throne.

OEDIPUS

Lady, you laugh?

JOCASTA

Is it not as I told you? Look on your old terror and smile.

OEDIPUS

Yes. Yes. But wait. (*To the messenger*) How did he die?

JOCASTA

What does it matter? Not by your hand.

OEDIPUS

I can't explain it. The terror lives. How, Sir?

MESSENGER

(*Confused*) He . . . he was old. That's all.

OEDIPUS

And I never touched him. Never laid a hand on that dear  
head. All these years. Never even saw his face. I fled him to  
save him and ran straight into my life. It is all . . .

JOCASTA

Senseless! Embrace the mad indifference of the world and  
rejoice. You are released from fear.

OEDIPUS

But that keening voice in the cavern of god, it still howls in  
my blood.

JOCASTA

It is just noise, love. There's no meaning in it—no more to be

feared than the whistling of the wind across an empty bucket.

OEDIPUS

But my mother? But the queen?

MESSENGER

She lives. And longs to see your face.

OEDIPUS

Ah, but that she cannot. Never. Hers is the last knot in that bloody noose around my neck. The rope I've trailed behind me all these years.

JOCASTA

My king! Don't you see? You can do your mother no harm! There is no truth to be found in these mutterings and useless oracles. It is all just nonsense and superstition. The world is ruled by chance. Nothing more. We cannot know the future, and even the past is lost to memory, that old fabricator who unravels every stitch, invents as much as she recounts. All you can trust is the present moment, the pulse that counts the seconds out. Everything else is like a dream you wake from and cannot quite recall. We shed these shadows in the light of the day, they lift like mist in the morning's heat and are forgotten. This. Just this; now; is all we can lay claim to. This is the only solid ground. Plant your feet on this and be happy. Plant your feet on this and be free.

OEDIPUS

Yes, my queen. But my mother, my mother lives. And while she does, I cannot risk it. The fear lives with her.

MESSENGER

What fear, if I may ask, sir, in that lady?

OEDIPUS

An oracle I was given—the voice of god itself—that I would

do my parents unspeakable harm.

MESSENGER

Your parents, you say?

OEDIPUS

Yes, Polybus and Merope. Dearly as I loved them, I fled from them to protect them from that crime.

MESSENGER

And that's why you never came back to us? I never knew.

OEDIPUS

Yes, I ran, abandoned them to let them live safe from their only son.

MESSENGER

But sir, if you'll permit me, you are not that. Never were.

OEDIPUS

What?

MESSENGER

Whoever's son you are, they are not your parents. No more than I am.

OEDIPUS

No more than—? What do you mean?

MESSENGER

You do not know? And to think that I, of all people, should be the one to tell you. No, your love could not hurt Merope. You could never have harmed Polybus. You were not born of them.

OEDIPUS

Be clear, man. What do you mean? How can you know

something I do not?

MESSENGER

Because I was the one who gave you to them.

OEDIPUS

You? What are you saying?

MESSENGER

Yes. Me. It was on the thorny slopes of Citheron. I was a shepherd. You were a tiny baby, bald head lolling on a neck, staring eyes. You'd been left there. Such a cruel thing. This naked mite. I wrapped you in a lamb's pelt. You weighed nothing at all. I went to the palace at dawn. There she was, walking the halls, as she always did, like a sleep walker. Years had gone by, years of disappointment. The gods wouldn't give her a child and the queen had grown old with it. She would walk back and forth all night, pounding her fists on her stubborn empty belly, tears streaking her lean pale face. Poor dear. I entered the palace with this little bundle—you—and found her there. I didn't say anything—just held you out to her. Like this. She looked at you and, oh, the smile. I've never seen anything like it. You peeped out of that wool. Like a face in a cloud. She took you in her arms and then, I'll never forget it, she licked her finger and gently stroked the dirt from your forehead. It was all so silent, like a dream.

And then she was walking, swaying down the hall with you, humming some wordless song, lost in your eyes. The eyes in the cloud.

It's the best thing I ever got to do in my life. You.

Giving you to her like that.

OEDIPUS

*(Amazed, quiet)* I was never their son. I was never their son.

MESSENGER

It changed everything for me, I can tell you. No more shep-

herding for me. That was all over. I was indoors now. Walking down those shiny halls. Wearing good-smelling clothes. Ordering people around. I liked that. And when I'd see you running past me, flailing some toy sword, frowning with some imaginary story, I'd put a hand out and skim the top of your head—you never noticed—and smile to think of what I'd done.

OEDIPUS

But who am I then? What kind of mistake am I born from? Who left me there? Who would do that?

MESSENGER

Oh, I don't know. But I know the man who might.

OEDIPUS

Who?

MESSENGER

The man who found you.

OEDIPUS

I thought you said you found me.

MESSENGER

No, I wasn't the one who saved you. I just delivered you, deposited you into that good life. The one who saved you was another shepherd. I came upon him just before dawn. It was a cold morning, the sheep were snorting steam, their hooves making sharp marks in the ice. He was standing there, still as a post, bent over something. I thought, something is wrong, poor man, maybe one of his lambs has died. Maybe a dog. But when I got to him, I saw he was holding this naked creature, you, staring down at it, dazed. He kept saying, "I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do."

OEDIPUS

Who is this man? Where is this man?

MESSENGER

He was one of Laius' slaves. I knew him from the mountains.  
He drove the largest of the flocks.

OEDIPUS

Does anyone know who this is?

CHORUS

Yes, king. There's only one man it could be.

OEDIPUS

Does he live?

CHORUS

Yes, king. In fact, I think he is the very slave you've already  
sent for. The eye witness to the murder. Isn't that so, queen?  
You would know.

*(Jocasta does not speak.)*

OEDIPUS

Jocasta? You must know.

*(Jocasta does not speak.)*

Why don't you answer me? Is that the man?

JOCASTA

I don't know. I don't know.

OEDIPUS

You know. You must.

JOCASTA

No. No.

OEDIPUS

I have to find him. Ask him.

JOCASTA

Don't. Please. Don't.

OEDIPUS

But I have to. You must see that. He's the only person who can tell me who I am.

JOCASTA

Why ask? Why know? Live without knowing. Live, Oedipus.

MESSENGER

Oedipus. Swollen foot. That's right. That's how you got your name.

OEDIPUS

What do you mean?

MESSENGER

Whoever it was who left you, they'd done this thing—horrible, really—they'd pierced your little ankles, run a leather thong through them, bound them together. Gave you one leg instead of two, so you couldn't crawl. I saw the bloody cord hanging down when I went over to the shepherd. It was me who cut it, released your legs, before I wrapped you in the fleece. Poor thing. It hurt so much you didn't even cry.

OEDIPUS

My old wound. My limp. Now I know.

Who would do that? What kind of parents—?

*(A cry escapes from Jocasta.)*

What is it, queen?

JOCASTA

You must not know. Promise me, it's all I ask. Promise me you will not look further. Let it rest here.

OEDIPUS

How can I promise you that? Why would you ask me to? You know me. Is it that you fear what I'll find out?



JOCASTA

Yes.

OEDIPUS

I see. You think I'll discover I'm some backstairs bastard. Is that it? You think I'll find out that I'm some poor mother's sordid little secret? Well, of course I am. I must be. Why else would they do that to me? But why let that bother you? I am still who I am. Your king. Your husband. It doesn't bother *me*. I feel better than I have in years. I'm free at last. This is so good. For the first time in my life I am utterly myself. Born of nothing. Beholden to nothing. I am my own man. Now I must find out. I'm hungry for that knowledge. It's all so improbable. I'm alive, against all odds. I must find out what kind of miracle I am.

JOCASTA

Never. Leave it in darkness. Let it be.

OEDIPUS

That is not who I am. You know that. I will know the truth, whatever it is.

JOCASTA

I beg this from love, for your own good.

OEDIPUS

My own good? Let me be the judge of that. No more darkness! Give me light! How could you think I would ever choose ignorance?

JOCASTA

Ignorance was your only hope.  
My unlucky stranger. Goodbye again.

*(Jocasta leaves. Silence.)*

CHORUS

It's a strange silence she leaves us in. Like that stillness, that

hush before the storm rushes in.

OEDIPUS

Let it come! Let the sky break to pieces and wash the face of the world! Pound this hard ground into pocked mud; level us; batter all the windows; rattle all the gates!

I am going in at last. Turning the handle on my last door, stepping across the threshold to meet my fate in the dim room. There he is, the stranger, standing in the dark corner next to the closet door, I will see his face at last.

I have no fear of him. She is afraid of what I'll see there—an ignominious birth. Child of a slave, child of some drunken nobody. I don't care. I know who gave birth to me. I've always known: Chance and fortune. Luck and the roll of the dice. These are my real parents. Always were. Who could ask for better? They have given me everything. No one has been luckier than me.

I will know who I am. I will know who I am.

I am not ashamed.

Let the knowledge fall on me like a summer rain.

CHORUS

Yes! Yes! Let the storm break!

Let the secret of your birth  
thunder out of the silence.

Let it echo across your mighty mountain home.

Let great Citheron ring with it.

Let the wide earth sound with it.

We always knew this.

Knew that you were the child of mystery.

Your parents could be nothing mortal, nothing common.

No, you are too strange and wonderful for such a birth.

The gods have had their hands on you from the first.

Your eyes glitter like the surface of the sacred mountain stream.

Your mind darts like golden arrows loosed from the god's own bow.

Was it the nimble god Pan who begot you with some dancing nymph in the wild?

Was it Hermes, swift spirit of the lightning ridges, who mated with some bride of the high peaks?

Or did Dionysus leave his wine kisses on some daughter of the mountains?

Or are you the child of light, begotten from the scattered brightness of Apollo's passing grace?

All these are worthy of the story of your birth.

Your greatness will sound at last, loosed from its divine captivity in the stones of great Mount Citheron.

*(The Shepherd enters, hesitant, reluctant.)*

OEDIPUS

The stranger approaches. Is this the man? Yes.

This is the man. At last.

So slight a person, yet he carries everything I need to know.

All my secrets are shining like jewels in the darkness of that ancient skull.

Look. They light his eyes.

Come to me. Stand before me. I will ask you at last.

Did you serve King Laius? Were you his slave?

SHEPHERD

Yes. But I wasn't bought from an auction block.

I was born and bred in this palace.

OEDIPUS

What was your work?

SHEPHERD

I drove the flocks.

OEDIPUS

Where?

SHEPHERD

I grazed them on Mount Citheron.

OEDIPUS

*(Gesturing to the Messenger)* Do you know this man?

SHEPHERD

Which man?

OEDIPUS

This one. Right here. Did you ever see him there?

SHEPHERD

On Citheron? I, this man? I couldn't say. My eyes are bad.

OEDIPUS

Look harder then. Take your time. Do you know his face?

*(The Messenger goes up to him. They stare at each other.)*

MESSENGER

It has been a long time, old friend. We were young men together, mingling our flocks, we drove them up into the high pastures when the spring began. We talked, perched on some high rock, watching over them below us. Through the hot summer, the buzzing in the air, the sound of all those creatures, cropping the grass, all those long days, we kept each other company. And when the winter came we parted, driving the herds down different faces of the mountain. Until the spring came round again. You remember.

SHEPHERD

Yes, I guess . . . It's all so long ago.

MESSENGER

You remember. We were great friends.  
And then there was that cold morning. I found you with the  
child?

SHEPHERD

Child?

MESSENGER

That poor baby. You'd found him, you said. You didn't know  
what to do with him. You were crying. I said, "Give him to  
me. I'll take care of him." And you did. You remember.

SHEPHERD

Terrible secret. Why do you speak of it now?

MESSENGER

Look, here he is. Standing in front of you. That baby sur-  
vived. Grew up to become a king. Isn't that something?

SHEPHERD

Shut up, you idiot!

OEDIPUS

Don't you yell at him, old man. What's wrong with you?

SHEPHERD

He's talking nonsense. It's all just noise.

OEDIPUS

I am your king. You will say what I brought you here to tell  
me.

SHEPHERD

But I have nothing to tell you. Really. I'm nobody. I never  
saw anything.

OEDIPUS

You saw it all. You were there at every crossroads of my life.  
You will talk. You have no choice. Pin his arms. Twist them.

SHEPHERD

God help me. Why? Why are you doing this to me?

OEDIPUS

Did you give him that child?

SHEPHERD

Yes. I wish I'd died that day.

OEDIPUS

We'll happily kill you now, if you like.

SHEPHERD

Yes. Kill me now.

OEDIPUS

Not before you tell me what I summoned you to say.

SHEPHERD

Oh, please. Just let me die.

OEDIPUS

Where did you find the child? Did someone give it to you?  
Did you do that to it yourself?

SHEPHERD

No. I didn't do that. It was some one else.

OEDIPUS

Who? Whose child?

SHEPHERD

I beg you. No more.

OEDIPUS

You have no choice in the matter. Speak. Where did you get the child?

SHEPHERD

It was from the house. This house.

OEDIPUS

Was it some slave's baby? Was it someone who worked here who gave it to you?

SHEPHERD

I can't say. I can't say it.

OEDIPUS

You can. And you will.

SHEPHERD

It was of this house. Born here.

OEDIPUS

Yes. But whose?

SHEPHERD

His.

OEDIPUS

Whose?

SHEPHERD

The king's.

OEDIPUS

The king's?

SHEPHERD

Laius. He was the king's own son.

*(Oedipus makes a motion. The Shepherd is released.)*

I couldn't do it. They said he was cursed. Fated to murder his own father. Said that I must kill him, leave him on the rocks. They'd mutilated him, pierced his ankles, then strung them through and bound them, to keep him from crawling. Someone said, "It'll be faster that way." They kept saying, "We're trusting you to do what's right. Take him up there and leave him. Don't come back until you've done it." I took him into the night. It was so cold, I held him to my chest, tried to keep him warm there. He didn't even cry. It was as if he knew what was happening to him. I couldn't see. Stumbling as I climbed up in the dark until I got to the top. I knew what I was supposed to do. Just put him down and go back. Put him down, leave him, leave him. But I couldn't do it. I pitied him too much. His eyes looking up. Trusting me. I couldn't put him down. And then the shepherd came. I gave him to him. Knew he'd take him to the other side of the mountain, another country, let him live. Let him live. Anything would be better, I thought. So, empty-handed, I went back down the mountain, back to the palace. And I thought, "I'll never see him again. But he will live."

OEDIPUS

But you did see me again.

SHEPHERD

Yes, at the crossroads. When you were killing me. But I was saved by a strange mercy. I lived. To return to my city, and look upon my new king.

OEDIPUS

Light. Light. Light. I can see too much.  
All of it. All of it. This open book of infamy.  
My sordid stain of a life. Open to the light.

Enough. No more. Where is the darkness? Let it swallow me.  
*(Oedipus hurtles into the palace.)*



*(The image from the beginning of the play appears, the child curled, his back to the audience. The same counting out-of-sequence begins, and continues under the length of the following. The Sphinx: One, two, four, three, two, three, one, four . . . etc.)*

CHORUS

What is this thing?

What is this thing?

Child of nothingness.

Child of chance.

*(We hear long ripping sounds, sheets being ripped.)*

Creature, animal, naked to the air.

It shivers in the darkness of the world.

It knows too little.

It knows too much.

*(Dimly, we begin to make out that Jocasta is ripping sheets.)*

It doesn't know why it was saved.

But it knows it will die.

It doesn't know why it lives.

But it knows it will die.

It tells stories to itself in the darkness.

Making things up.

Muttering in the darkness.

The story of happiness.

The story of fame.

The story of heroes.

Tells its beads.

Makes gestures in the air.

Makes promises.

It thinks. It thinks.

It thinks it has done something.

It thinks it can be safe.

It thinks. It thinks.

It thinks it can be happy.

It thinks that something of it will last.

*(Jocasta hangs herself, using the strips  
of the sheets as a rope.)*

Listen to it muttering.

Telling stories in the dark.

What is this thing?

What is this thing?

This cursed and holy thing.

This holy accursed thing.

*(A cry. Oedipus finds Jocasta.)*

Everything that can be suffered, it suffers.

Oedipus. Oedipus.

How we have loved you.

And when we loved you, we loved ourselves.

How we have praised you.

And when we praised you, we praised ourselves.

No man has meant more to us.

No man so envied.

No man so honored.

And now.

And now.

And now.

*(His back to the audience,  
Oedipus holds the brooches up.)*

We wish we'd never seen you.

*(He plunges the brooches down into his eyes.*

*Full blackout.)*

God forgive us all.

*(Lights up.*

*Once again he holds the brooches up.)*

You gave us the light.

Now you plunge the world into darkness.

*(He plunges the brooches down into his eyes.*

*Full blackout.)*

VOICE

The queen is dead.

The queen is dead.

The queen is dead.

And the king . . . the king . . . the king . . .

*(Lights up. The palace doors open. Oedipus is revealed,  
standing in the threshold, blinded. Silence.)*

CHORUS

Your eyes. Your eyes. What made you do that?

OEDIPUS

Nothing. No one. My own hands.

They chose this. The blind need blindness.

It was right.

Someone is speaking. He's making sound.

Listen to him. Speaking in the night.

As if there was anything to say.

*(The Shepherd approaches him.)*

I am being seen. I can feel it on my face.

*(The Shepherd touches him.)*

You. The one who always saw me. The only one who ever did.

The one who saved me. For this.

*(Oedipus spits at him. The Shepherd doesn't react.  
Oedipus falls into his embrace.)*

I beg you. You are the one who must do this.

Deliver me now.

Deliver me to obscurity at last.

Lead me to the mountains again. Take me there once more.

But this time, this time, leave me there.

You promised. Leave the cursed creature there.

*(Creon enters.)*

CREON

This is obscene. No one should look on this.

OEDIPUS

My brother moon. Forgive this broken monster.

Let me go.

CREON

It is not for you to say. Not for me to say.  
You belong to the gods now.  
We will ask them what to do with you.

OEDIPUS

They have already spoken: Drive him out.

CREON

Do not seek to command. That time is gone, Oedipus.  
You are no longer a king.  
What you are now, no one can say.

OEDIPUS

I am the walking corruption.  
I beg you. Save the city.  
Banish me and live.

CREON

Your fate is something I cannot determine.  
I will not touch it. We will wait. Go inside.

OEDIPUS

No, no, not inside. Please. Exile is all I can bear.

CHORUS

Lord. Take pity. Let him go.

CREON

All right. Yes. Sightless, leave our sight, Oedipus.  
Never return.

CHORUS

We have seen this. We have seen this.  
We are cursed now with knowledge.  
We can never return to innocence.  
Go, King. Go.

We will live in your absence, we will go on.  
And for the rest of time, all we will be doing is trying to forget you.

*(Oedipus is led away by the Shepherd. End of play.)*