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SCARS

When I was young, I longed for scars
like my father's. They were the best
scars on his block, startling, varied,
pink as a tongue against his whiskey skin.

The longest bolted from his elbow,
finger-thick where the barbed wire plunged in,
a satin rip thinning toward the wrist.
I read the riddle of my father's body

like a legend punctuated by pale hyphens,
neat commas, surgical asterisks, and exclamation
points from scalp to ankle. His tragic knuckles
spoke wordless violence in demotic Greek.

My silent father said little - too little, it seems -
but after the divorce he told me, tracing
the curved path on his skull where hair never grew,
"It's the ones you can't see that kill you."

and it's true our doctor said his liver,
which did him in, was scarred like an old war horse.
Still, the wound I knew best I gave him myself, hitting
a pop fly straight up and swinging the child's bat again

with all my might as the ball descended
over the plate. He had run to catch it
and the bat cracked him under his chin, dropping
my father like a murdered king, peeling a wound

no butterfly bandage could cover. I was too stunned
to move, but the look my mother gave me proved,
no matter what happened later, this man bleeding
like Laius on the ground was the one she loved.

Peter Meinke

AND ALSO

Jocasta

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
in the mountain slope. They would
have no other children.

I remember Laius drunk that night, crying
for Chrysippus, the source of his curse.
Wanting this 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 ritual 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.
Soem 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
knows the answer. No one.

The Sphinx brought pestilence and
drought. Rivers and streams and 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 Shinx. 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.

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 prophecy was false. How can that be
if the 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 unravelling knots. The knots become a rope.

I wake shaking and muffle my tears in the sheets.

2

"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.

I see the 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. I love this youth.
My sun, I rise to him and with him.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

Mine turns grey but he doesn't seem to mind.
Our love has brought to me the joy that I missed
when I was young and thought I'd never know.
At last, I lay to rest my little boy,
his shadow vanished now from all my dreams.

3

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

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

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

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.

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.

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.
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 the baby died when one week old.

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 that he has
been cursed. Dear gods, how can I comfort him?

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

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.

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.

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."

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

5

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.

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 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.

My God, we've had four children.

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.

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.

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

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 one on me.
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,
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.
It is not just. It can never 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.

Falling on her hands and 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.

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 became a rank
corruption.

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.

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

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.
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 all fools to trifle with, your joke.

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

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

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.

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

She stepped onto the air.

-----RUTH F. EISENBERG

[b. 1927]

>From Literature: Reading Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and the Essay
Robert DiYanni