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 prophecy 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.

"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 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.

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.

III

Years of plenty at an end, Thebes was inflicted 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 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 grows just like a wounded pup.

Jocasta, very gray 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 peek 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 prophecy 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.

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?

IV

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 prophecy 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."

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.

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.

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 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 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.

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.

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.

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 your 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 pounding inside my head.
Five babies. Five abominations.
As through 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. Undefflected, 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.

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