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HUNGERFIELD *and other Poems*

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R O B I N S O N

J E F F E R S

H U N G E R F I E L D

A N D O T H E R P O E M S

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NOTE

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R. J.

HUNGERFIELD *and other Poems*



HUNGERFIELD

If time is only another dimension, then all that dies
Remains alive; not annulled, but removed
Out of our sight. Una is still alive.
A few years back we are making love, greedy as hawks,
A boy and a married girl. A few years back
We are still young, strong-shouldered, joyfully laboring
To make our house. Then she, in the wide sea-window,
Endlessly enduring but not very patient,
Teaches our sons to read. She is still there,
Her beautiful pale face, heavy hair, great eyes
Bent to the book. And a few years back
We sit with our grown sons in the pitching motor-boat
Off Horn Head in Donegal, watching the sea-parrots
Tumble like clowns along the thousand-foot cliff, and the gannets
 like falling stars
Hawk at the sea: her great blue eyes are brimmed
With the wild beauty. Or we walk in Orkney,
Under the mystery of huge stones that stand there,
Raised high in the world's dawn by unknown men to forgotten
 gods,
And see dimly through the deep northern dusk

Hungerfield

A great skein of wild swans drop from the cloud
To the gray lake. She weeps a little for joy of beauty. Only the
homecoming
To our loved rock over the gray and ageless Pacific
Makes her such joy.

It is possible that all these conditions
of us
Are fixed points on the returning orbit of time and exist
eternally . . .

It is no good. Una has died, and I
Am left waiting for death, like a leafless tree
Waiting for the roots to rot and the trunk to fall.

I never thought you would leave me, dear love.
I knew you would die some time, I should die first—
But you have died. It is quite natural:
Because you loved life you must die first, and I
Who never cared much live on. Life is cheap, these days;
We have to compete with Asia, we are cheap as dust,
And death is cheap, but not hers. It is a common thing:
We die, we cease to exist, and our dear lovers
Fulfil themselves with sorrow and drunkenness, the quart at
midnight
And the cups in the morning—or they go seeking
A second love: but you and I are at least
Not ridiculous.

September again. The gray grass, the gray sea,
The ink-black trees with white-bellied night-herons in them,
Brawling on the boughs at dusk, barking like dogs—
And the awful loss. It is a year. She has died: and I
Have lived for a long year on soft rotten emotions,
Vain longing and drunken pity, grief and gray ashes—
Oh child of God!

Hungerfield

It is not that I am lonely for you. I am lonely:
I am mutilated, for you were part of me:
But men endure that. I am growing old and my love is gone:
No doubt I can live without you, bitterly and well.
That's not the cry. My torment is memory
My grief to have seen the banner and beauty of your brave life
Dragged in the dust down the dim road to death. To have seen
you defeated,
You who never despaired, passing through weakness
And pain—

to nothing. It is usual I believe. I stood by; I believe
I never failed you. The contemptible thought—
Whether I failed or not! I am not the one.
I was not dying. Is death bitter, my dearest? It is nothing.
It is a silence. But dying can be bitter.

In this black year
I have thought often of Hungerfield, the man at Horse Creek,
Who fought with Death—bodily, said the witnesses, throat for
throat,
Fury against fury in the dark—
And conquered him. If I had had the courage and the hope—
Or the pure rage—
I should be now Death's captive, no doubt, not conqueror.
I should be with my dearest, in the hollow darkness
Where nothing hurts.

I should not remember
Your silver-backed hand-mirror you asked me for,
And sat up in bed to gaze in it, to see your face
A little changed. You were still beautiful,
But not—as you'd been—a falcon. You said nothing; you sighed
and laid down the glass; and I
Made a dog smile over a tearing heart,
Saying that you looked well.

The lies—the faithless hopeless

unbelieved lies,
While you lay dying.

For these reasons

I wish to make verses again, to drug memory,
To make it sleep for a moment. Never fear: I shall not forget you—
Until I am with you. The dead indeed forget all things.
And when I speak to you it is only play-acting
And self-indulgence: you cannot hear me, you do not exist.
Dearest . . .

The story: Horse Creek drives blithely down its rock bed
High on the thin-turfed mountain, as we have seen it, but at the
sea-mouth
Turns dark and fierce; black lava cliffs oppress it and it bites
through them, the redwood trees in the gorge-throat
Are tortured dwarfs deformed by centuries of storm, broad trunks
ancient as Caesar, and tattered heads
Hardly higher than the house. There is an angry concentration of
power here, rock, storm and ocean;
The skies are dark, and darkness comes up like smoke
Out of the ground.

It was here that Hungerfield sat by his mother's
bedside,
In the great room at the house-top, under the heavy slant of the
rafters: she had chosen this loft to lie in
Because it was as wide as the house, one could see west and east,
ocean and mountain, from the low-silled windows
Without lifting from bed. But now her eyes were closed, she lay
under opiate, gasping and muttering,
A tall woman, big-boned and aquiline-faced, with thin gray hair
And thin gray lips. She had been on her bed helpless for half a year
Like a ship on a reef.

Hungerfield

Hungerfield sat beside her, his great shoulders
hunched like a vulture's.

There was nothing to do, and he felt his strength
Turn sour, unused. He had been a man of violence, and formed for
violence, but what could violence do here?
He could not even breathe for her. She was, in fact, drowning,
here on the bed; metastases of cancer
Had found the lungs.

This is my wound. This is what never time
nor change nor whiskey will heal:

To have watched the bladed throat-muscles lifting the breast-bone,
frail strands of exhausted flesh, laboring, laboring
Only for a little air. The poets who sing of life without remembering
its agony
Are fools or liars.

Hungerfield watched the winter day's end die in
dark fire

In the west windows. He lighted the little coal-oil lamp in its
bracket and sat down again,
Hunched, full of helpless fury. He had fought in two so-called
world wars, he had killed men, he knew all the tricks,
But who kills cancer?

He remembered when he was young, after his
first battle,

He had met Death in a hospital. Dreamed it, no doubt, dizzy with
ether, having three machine-gun slugs through his belly,
And killed some men, two of them with his hands after he was
wounded: he had seen Death come in for him,
Into the French barn which they called a hospital. Death walked
in human form, handsome and arrogant
Among the camp-cots, a long, dark and contemptuous face, em-
peror of all men, choosing the souls
That he would take. It was nothing horrible; it was only absolute
power

Hungerfield

Taking his own. He beckoned: the obedient soul
Flew into his hand. Hungerfield thought that Death was right to
despise them, they came like slaves. He thought,
“The poor bastards are tired after a battle”—he thought in his own
language—“and their wounds hurt,
They want relief”—but at that moment the towering dark power
approached him and made a sign,
Such as one makes to a dog, trained but not liked,
“Come here to me.” Hungerfield felt such a wave of rage
That his wounds closed their mouths; the leonine adrenal glands
poured their blind fury
Into his blood, and the great nerves of the brain
Gave eyes to it; he was suddenly well and powerful, with burning
eyes: “Come and try me. We’ll see
Which one’s the dog.” Death amazed glared at him.

He was like the defeated
Roman dictator in the ruins of Carthage,
Alone, when the two soldiers found him, unarmed and guardless,
his head worth an ass’s load of gold:
He lifted his indomitable head, scowling, and they
Fled from him, like boys who have chased a rabbit in the bushes
and find a bear. So Death stared at Hungerfield,
Death himself, with his empty black eyes and sneering astonished
face, at such a mask of fury
That he preferred to avoid it. The blue eyes and the black ones
fought in the air: it was Death’s that failed.
He shrugged his high heavy shoulders and turned aside.

“My senseless dream,”

Hungerfield thought. “The loss of blood and the dregs of ether
made a fine dream.
How I wish it were true.” He looked at his mother’s face, gasping
and drained, and the thin lips
Black in the half-light. She had enormous vitality, he hoped she
was not conscious. He heard light footsteps

Hungerfield

Mounting the stair, and the door opened. It was his young wife
Arab, a girl so blonde that her hair
Shone like another lamp at the end of the room, in the dark door-
way. She stood a moment,
And came quietly and kissed him. "Won't you come down to sup-
per, dearest? I will stay here." "No," he said,
And twitched his thumb toward the dark door: she patiently
Went out and closed it.

Hungerfield was waiting for his enemy,
And coiled to strike. The conscious upper layer of his mind did not
one moment believe
That Death had a throat and one could reach it, but his blood did.
What he had seen he had seen. It was dangerous
For any person to come into the room: he had only by force and
will kept his hands
From his dear Arab.

Meanwhile the gentle click of the door-latch
and Arab's entrance
Had touched the ears of the old woman dying; and slowly, from
nerve-complex to nerve-complex,
Through the oxygen-starved brain crawled into her mind. She rolled
her head on the pillow: "Who is that? There! There!"
Her tremulous finger pointing at shapes and shadows in the room
twilight, her terrified eyes peering,
Following phantoms. "Nothing, Mother, nothing: there's no one.
Arab was here,
But she has gone." "I'm dying now," she said. "Can't you see?"
She gasped rapidly awhile and whispered, "Not a nice death: no
air." "You will not die, Mother.
You are going to get well."

It is a common lie to the dying,
and I too have told it; but Hungerfield—
While his mind lied his blood and body believed. He had seen
Death and he would see him again.

Hungerfield

He was waiting for his enemy.

Night deepened around the house;
the sea-waves came up into the stream,
And the stream fought them; the cliffs and standing rocks black
and bone-still
Stood in the dark. There were no stars, there were some little
sparkles of glowworms on the wet ground,
If you looked closely, and shapes of things, and the shifting foam-
line. The vast phantasmagoria of night
Proceeded around that central throat begging for breath, and Hun-
gerfield
Sat beside it, rigid and motionless as the rocks but his fingers
twitching, hunched like a cat
To spring and tear.

Then the throat clicked and ceased. Hungerfield
looked at it; when he looked back
The monster was in the room. It was a column of heavy darkness
in the dim lamplight, but the arrogant head
Was clear to see. That damned sneer on his face. Hungerfield felt
his hair rise like a dog's
And heard Death saying scornfully: "Quiet yourself, poor man,
make no disturbance; it is not for you.
I have come for the old woman Alcmena Hungerfield, to whom
death
Will be more kind than life." Hungerfield saw his throat and
sprang at it. But he was like a man swimming
A lake of corpses, the newly harvested souls from all earth's fields,
faint shrieks and whispers, Death's company.
He smote their dim heads with his hands and their bowels with
his feet
And swam on them. He reached Death's monstrous flesh and they
cleared away. It had looked like a shadow,
It was harder than iron. The throat was missed, they stood and
hugged each other like lovers; Hungerfield

Drove his knee to the groin. Death laughed and said,
“I am not a man,” and the awful embrace tightened
On the man’s loins; he began to be bent backward, writhing and
sobbing; he felt the years of his age
Bite at his heart like rats: he was not yet fifty: but it is known that
little by little God abandons men
When thirty’s past. Experience and cunning may perhaps increase
But power departs. He struck short at the throat and was bent
further backward, and suddenly
Flung himself back and fell, dragging Death down with him, twist-
ing in the fall, and weasel-quick on the floor
Tore at the throat: then the horrible stench and hopelessness of
dead bodies filled the dim air; he thought
He had wounded Death. What? The iron force and frame of
nature with his naked hands? It bubbled and gasped,
“You fool—what have you done!” The iron flesh in his grip melted
like a summer corpse, and turning liquid
Slid from his hands. He stood up foaming and groped for it; there
was nothing. He saw in the stair-door
Arab, and Ross his brother, and the hired cattlehand
Staring with eyes like moons. They had heard a chair crash and
seen the fury; Arab had screamed like a hawk,
But no one heard her; now she stood moaning, gazing at him. But
Ross entered the room and walked
Carefully wide around him to their mother’s bed. The old woman
was sitting up and breathed easily, saying
“I saw it all. Listen: they are taking him away.” A strain of mourn-
ful music was heard, from the house
Flitting up the black night. This was the time—it was near mid-
night here—for a quarter of an hour
Nobody died. Disease went on, and the little peripheral prophetic
wars, the famines and betrayals,
Neither man nor beast died, though they might cry for him. Death,
whom we hate and love, had met a worse monster

Hungerfield

And could not come.

Hungerfield writhed his mouth, striving to speak, and failed. He stood swaying, And spoke loud but not clearly: "To kill the swine. How did he get—" He lurched a step toward the bed And righted the fallen chair and sat on it, vulture-hunched and gray-faced. Then Arab ran to him, But stopped a man's length distant: "Dear, are you hurt?" "No," he said. "Keep away from me." "Oh God, I'm in terror of you. What have you done?" "Nothing. Nothing at all. I wiped the damned sneer off his face but he got away from me." She, with her hands on her throat, like a leaf shaking: "Who was it, who?" "Uh," he said. "Death. Can't you smell him? But the swine tricked me, And slip-slopped out." He worked his hard hands and stared at them: "Ross, is there any liquor in the house?" "Drunkard," The old woman answered, "as your father was." "Yea?" he said. "You're better, uh? You'll be all right, Mother."

In the morning she dressed herself without help, in the dim of dawn, And came downstairs. Then Hungerfield, who had watched all night beside her and dozed in the graying, awoke And followed down. He made a fire in the stove, and washed his hands and sliced meat; the old woman fried it And brought the coffee to boil. Arab came in with her little son, who ran to Hungerfield: "What happened, Daddy?" "Your grandmother has got well," he answered. "Then why is Mahmie so scared?" "Uh? No. Your Mahmie's glad. —Arab," he said, "I know there's a little whiskey hidden in the house. By God I want it." She smiled, and brought a half bottle from the linen-closet behind the linen. He said

To his mother, "Don't look, Mother," and filled a water-glass full
and drained it; she watched him with sidelong hatred
Through her gray brows. "Take a little more," she said, "and go
blind—

While Ross goes in to Arab and Death to me." "I had my hands
in him," he said—"Uh?—What?

What did you say?" "I said that one of my two sons is a drunken
bully, and the other defiles

His brother's wife." He stared at her and said, "You're . . . pretty
sick, Mother. Forget it, Arab.

Something has happened to her." "Something has happened to
me," the old woman answered. "I was dying and you filled the
room

With beastly violence. My beautiful dark angel, my lord and love,
who like a bridegroom had come for me,

You took him by the throat and killed him. Will you like it, Arab,
When he kills Ross?" The girl suddenly knelt to her, where she was
sitting, and laid her hands on her knees:

"Please tell the truth, Mother." "I'm telling the truth. From my
windows I watched you. He will surely kill him,

He kills horses and men."

Ross at that moment sleepily came in the
room. The old woman said,

"How do you dare?" "What?" he said. "How do you dare to come
in, where our handy killer whom you dishonored

Waits for your throat?" Then Arab, her face withered half size and
as white as paper, leaped up from kneeling:

"Quit lying, Mother!" and furiously turned on Hungerfield, who
had not stirred, "Be quiet!" she said. "Stand still!

It is a dream from hell." "No," he said quietly, "from the mor-
phine.

They get delusions." He looked over Arab's head at his brother:
"It's all right, Ross." And to his mother:

“I have to think you’re mistaken.” “Tell that sulphur-haired harlot,” she screamed, pointing, “that I always hated her— And well she earns it. I watched their antics.

I kept it quiet while I died, not to cause trouble: but you force me to live in this horrible world;

I’ll see it straight. Here’s a knife, Hawl—

If you’re tired from last night.” Suddenly she hooded her face with her hands

And wept in them. “Don’t you believe me, Hawl? You are as quiet as a great cold stone standing there,

Standing there blind—.” “I think you’re still sick, Mother. You will get well.” “What have you done to me?” she answered.

“What awful thing? All that I said was false and I knew it.

You are all good and faithful, so far as I know. I hate life.

I hate the world. O children, pray for me.

Forgive me: I might have managed a horror here—

If your minds had been quick—” “I think you’re still troubled by the drug, Mother,” he answered; and Arab’s child

Began to wail like a little dog that has lost his master. He is all alone by the bombed house,

And they never come home; he sits in the empty gate, his mouth small and rounded, turned straight to heaven,

Starving, and wails.

The old woman watched Arab trying to quiet him,

And spoke, but no one through the crying of the child

Could hear her words. She tottered up from her chair and reached her hands to him, but Arab

Turned her shoulder against her, hugging him from her; then little Norrie (they called him) ceased crying,

But only sobbed, and looked up dimly through tears and said

“Granma.” She reached her hands to him. “He knows already, he knows what life is, it breaks his heart;

But we shall be so good to him . . . O little pearl, little wet frightened face, flower in the rain,

Forgive me, dear, I forgot

That I have someone to live for and love and pray for. Come to me, dear." Hungerfield watched her carefully,

And said, "Let her have him, Arab." "No," she said, "I will not."

His eyes darkened toward wrath. The old woman said,

"You know that I'd never hurt him. Are you jealous of me? Will you come to Granma, dearest?" He smiled at her

Over Arab's arm. "See now, he's not afraid of me—" "I am afraid of you," Arab answered,

And took the child in her arms out of the room.

All that day

The old woman wandered about the house unreconciled, wringing her hands, peccing at the household things,

Jealous of changes. Hungerfield remained near her, fearing that his great enemy might yet return—

Not hoping now—for his wrath was spent and his blood stilled,

Like the black ebb of the sea, cold, flat and still: deep-lying rocks, furred with dark weed and slime,

Rise from the slack. Suddenly she turned on him, crying wildly, "Let me alone! You've done enough to me.

D' y' have to follow me like a monstrous poodle all through the house?" He patiently answered, "Well, Mother—

You nearly died . . ." "I died," she said, "and you dragged me back, to gloat on my misery.

O you are very brave with your strangler hands: your murderous hands tearing the holy angel of God—

God will punish you for it." "God-if-there-is-a-God," he answered wearily, "is neutral, it is nothing to him.

He has the stars." He made a thin smile on his mouth and said, "—as America

Ought to have been." "He is punishing *me*," she said. "I know for what crime: life is the crime. I gave you

The horrible gift, I was ignorant and gave it.
I forced out that great head of yours between my thighs, bleeding
and screaming, tearing myself to pieces:
I am now punished for it—and the monstrous plant that grew up
out of my body is the stick to beat me:
That's you, that's you!" "You've had a bad time, mother," he answered
patiently. "You'll soon be better, I think.
Will you go up to town to the doctor with me? Or the young
doctor
Can come down here." "I had one friend in the world," she answered,
"loving and faithful: when he came you killed him.
I hate your hangdog face and your horrible hands: I cannot bear
you: have mercy on me,
Get out of my sight." He felt a sharp gust of wrath returning: "I
didn't kill him:
By God I *will*." "I am so homesick for him, his peace and love, it
is pitiful," she answered.
But she came more into control of herself
As the days passed. She stared at the sea a great deal; she watched
the sunsets burn fierce and low, or the cormorants
Roosting on the offshore rock, their sharp black wings half spread,
and black snaky throats; and the restless gulls
Riding the air-streams. She watched coldly the great south storms,
the tiger-striped, mud-yellow on purple black,
Rage in the offing. She seemed to find consolation in them. There
is no consolation in humanity—
Though Arab sometimes allowed her (carefully in her presence)
to hold
Little Norrie in her arms—only the acts and glory of unhuman
nature or immortal God
Can ever give our hurts peace.

But Alcmena Hungerfield

Was not for peace; she had become Death's little dog, stolen from
him

Hungerfield

By the strong hand, yelping all night for her dear master. She
stared at the sea a great deal, and her son
Came in from Monterey, stinking of whiskey but not altered by
it. "Here's the paper, Mother,"
He said, and laid it carefully on her knees, the Monterey newspaper
With headlines about the outflash of war in Asia. "We've got our
nose caught in the door again.
We always do." "Well . . . what?" she answered, staring at him
As she stared at the sea. "I thought you might be int'rested," he
answered. "Ross and I are too old
To go to it." She turned to an inner page and read,
Squinting her eyes to pull the print into shape, in the manner of
old age
In lack of glasses. Suddenly she began to tremble and said, "Thank
God!
Why did you lie to me, Hawl? People still die." "So do the calves,"
he answered,
"Three or four every night, and no reason known." "Why did you
lie about it then? Look here—"
She thrust the paper at him, trembling and pointing—"Satella
Venner died yesterday, my old friend.
I never liked the old woman, but I'd like to go." "Uh," he said,
"the funeral? Sure.
I'll take you there." "I want to see her dead face," she answered.

In the night Arab sat up,
Gasping with fear. "Wake up!" she whispered. He lay inert, softly
breathing; she dug her finger-ends
Into his great shoulder and the softer flesh over the gullet: "Wake
up for God's sake, Hawl.
He has come in!" Hungerfield brushed the little hand from his
throat like a biting fly and said
Quietly, "What?" "Something came in," she whispered through
clicking teeth. "I can hear it padding

Inside the house." "Ah hell," he said impatiently; but slid from bed and went about the house naked, Flashing the little electric torch into doors and corners, for the night was black. He went upstairs To the loft where his mother lay, and heard her on the bed quietly breathing. He drew the torchlight across, And her eyes were wide open. "Are you all right, Mother? It's Hawl." She made no answer. He stood awhile, And said, "Good night, Mother." He went back to bed, and Arab Sat huddled on it, small as a frightened child, hugging her knees to her throat. "Every night I hear it Hulking around the house, pawing at the walls— But tonight it came in." "Lie down," he said, "and be quiet." "Let her die, Hawl, she is so unhappy. O let her die!" "Little fool," he said, "there was nobody. I'm sorry for her. Unhappy—what's that? We win or *they* do." "I pray you, Hawl," she answered, "as if you were God: when *my* time comes O let me die!"

 In the morning Hungerfield took his mother to Monterey, to her friend's funeral. They drove home Late in the afternoon in the amber afterglow. The day had been like a festival. Hungerfield Accepted his mother's mood and was patient with her, and had supper with her On the Monterey fish-pier, they alone together. He thought that she seemed at last perhaps Not quite unhappy. She was even willing to taste wine, in the bright wind on the platform Over the gentle sea, and made no objection to him That what he drank was more violent than wine. She had even urged him to it, saying that the day Was a holiday; he failed to observe the calculation In her old eyes.

They were driving the coast-road
Where it loops into Torres Canyon over great precipices in the
heavy half-light. She said, "De Angulo
Went down here, he lay all night in the butt of the gorge, broken
to bits, but conscious,
Lying crushed on his dead son, under the engine of the car—let's
try, let's try!"—she leaped at the steering wheel,
Trying to slew it to the right, to the blue chasm: it was firm as
rock. She like a mountain-cat
Fought with her fingernails her son's hands; he said indulgently,
"Don't be afraid, Mother. *I'm* driving.
You are quite safe." "Safe in hell," she panted. "Oh—child—
What have I done to your hands!" They rounded the great head-
lands and came to Granite Point and drove down
Into the heavy fog clotted on Horse Creek.

The front of the house was
empty and blind

When they came near; only at the side two dim-lit rectangles
Faintly reddened the fog-stream. The front door stood wide open;
the steps were wet. Hungerfield
Helped his mother out of the car and they climbed them. A
wavering light
Walked in the room: Ross came slow to the door, the smoke-
blackened glass lamp skew in his hand;
He moved a chair with the other and said,
"Sit down, Mother." "We've had supper," she said. "I'll go straight
to bed." Hungerfield said fiercely:
"What's the matter? Where's Arab?" "Gone . . . gone," he an-
swered. His face was like a skull, stripped and hollow, and the
lamp
Rolled in his hand, so that his brother took it and said,
"Are you drunk, Ross?" He mumbled, "Unq-uh," shaking his head.
"Four more calves and your bay horse
Are—*dead*—" he screamed the word—"He comes behind you, Hawl,

Hungerfield

He works 'n the dark"—his head still shaking, apparently he could not stop it; his hair and his shirt hung
As if they were soaked with water. Hungerfield said, "You fool: talk sense.

Where has she gone?" "Oh, wait," he said, "for God's sake," pointing at the inner doorway; and gulped and shivered:

"In there." Hungerfield set the lamp down and strode to the door: it was pitch dark within: he said, "Arab?

Are you there, Arab?" Ross echoed him for no reason, saying loudly,

"Arab." His brother entered the room and they heard him fumbling in it, and his voice: "Where are you?" The old woman, Leaning against the chair-back, said coolly: "Well, Ross, What has happened?" "Mother," he said. He stood moving his lips without further words, and they heard Hungerfield

Move blind in the black room, and croak

In a strange voice, "Light, light!" They stood and stared at each other; then Ross opened his mouth and sucked

His lungs full, as if he were going to dive into deep water; he took the lamp from the table and carried it

To the dark room. The old woman followed him; and in the room quickly found matches, and lighted

A second lamp.

Arab and little Norrie lay without life together on the narrow bed,

Phantoms of what they had been. Hungerfield stood above them, gaunt, straight and staring

At Arab's discolored hair: their clothes and their yellow hair soaked with water and foam. Hungerfield said,

"I knew in the dark well enough." A frond of sea-weed stuck beside the child's nostrils, but Arab's face

Was clean pale marble; except her eyes were open, blue and suffused, and her half open mouth

Hungerfield

Had foam inside. Hungerfield said heavily, "How did they drown?"

Ross answered:

"I dived and pulled them out. I pumped her ribs with my hands for an hour, I think,

And she grew cold." Hungerfield heavily turned and said:

"Why did they go in water?" Ross answered, "He comes behind you, you know. I heard her screaming—" The old woman

Went around the bed and dropped by the child, her knees loud on the floor, her shaking gray head

On the child's breast. Ross said, "I was at the stable, you know, unsaddling. I ran down and saw her

Running out on the rocks carrying the baby, crying and running. She thought someone was after her.

She either jumped or fell in." "So that's your help," Hungerfield said. He felt his arm swell and strike—

One blow, but the neck broke. They heard the head strike the floor and the body shuddering, and Hungerfield

Did not look down. The old woman lifted up her desert-dry eyes from the child's breast and said:

"You've done it now." He stood considering the matter, hearing the rub of Ross's boots on the floor

As he twitched and was dying. "Ah," Hungerfield said, "I did it.

Yes. My monstrous fault." "Oh," she answered,

"Now me, now me!" "The fool had to interfere," he answered.

He knuckled his eyes and said heavily,

"I have another son in Alaska. I have no other brother and no other love. Arab.

Arab alone." "You've had many," she answered eagerly. "Look," he said,

"Oh, she was beautiful, Mother. She was always sweet, patient, and cheerful; she loved Norrie—and now

She has death in her mouth."

As if his name had called him, Death

Stood in the room. Alcmena Hungerfield well remembered him,

Hungerfield

The towering stature, the high thick shoulders and the arrogance,
the long dark narrow face and deep eyes
Set close together. "O dear dark God," she said, "I am here. Gently
I pray." But Hungerfield
Gazing at Arab's face did not hear her, and did not see
What came behind him and with a slight motion of the hand
beckoned
To Ross to come. The old woman saw the unfleshed soul
Blind and erratic as a beetle flying rise from the body; it jiggled
and darted in the air, and swam
Into Death's hand, which crushed it. Hungerfield turned and said,
"Is it you, Horse-face? I haven't called you yet.
Come again in ten minutes." He turned away, saying, "Arab is
dead. My dear Arab is dead.
And Ross, who was quick and loyal, skillful with cattle and a great
rider, is dead. My brave little man
Norrie is dead. —Hell, he gets three for one, and now the whole
game, he has tricked me witless.
But I'll make a good sunset—We'll dance in fire, Horse-face,
And go up yelling."

He went in the dark to the
kitchen store-room and fetched the big can of coal-oil,
Going heavily like a rock walking, violent and certain; but in the
darkness returning
He walked into a half open door, and with one hand
Tore it down from the hinges. He poured the coal-oil onto the
floor and the bed and the wooden walls,
And turned a lamp to flaring and flung it
Into the oil-pool. Bright flame stood up. The old woman said,
"Hawl . . .
Kill me before I burn." He said, "I've done enough and too much,
Mother.
Find a knife for yourself." She, thinly laughing: "You're not much
help, are you? But I've lived with pain

Hungerfield

As fish live with the sea. Or if it's tough I can drink smoke." But
her courage after a time
Failed, and she fled from the house before the bright flame em-
braced her.

Horse Creek sea-mouth at last for once
Was full of light; the fire drove away the fog; there was light every-
where. Black rock shone bright as blood;
The stream and the deep-throated waves of the ocean glittered with
crimson lightnings, and the low cloud
Gaped like a lion's mouth, swallowing the flights of flame and the
soul of a man. It is thus (and will be) that violence
Turns on itself, and builds on the wreck of violence its violent
beauty, the spiring fire-fountain
And final peace: grim in the desert in the lion's carcass the hive
of honey. But Alcmena Hungerfield
Hating both life and death fled from the place. She lived two years
yet, Death remembering her son, and died
As others do.

Here is the poem, dearest; you will never read it nor
hear it. You were more beautiful
Than a hawk flying; you were faithful and a lion heart like this
rough hero Hungerfield. But the ashes have fallen
And the flame has gone up; nothing human remains. You are earth
and air; you are in the beauty of the ocean
And the great streaming triumphs of sundown; you are alive and
well in the tender young grass rejoicing
When soft rain falls all night, and little rosy-fleeced clouds float
on the dawn. —I shall be with you presently.



THE CRETAN WOMAN

(Based on the Hippolytus of Euripides)

SCENE :

In front of the house of THESEUS at Troezen. Old masonry; big door, two or three stone steps up to it.

Left foreground, stone altar of APHRODITE. Wooded hills in the blue background.

PERSONS :

CHORUS—*Three poor women of the country. Tattered clothes, colorful patches; flowers in hair, or bright ribbons.* SECOND WOMAN carries a basket, THIRD WOMAN a primitive musical instrument, called here a zither.

SELENE—PHAEDRA'S waiting-woman; neither young nor old; demurely well dressed according to her station in life.

PHAEDRA

THE GODDESS APHRODITE

HIPPOLYTUS

ALCYON and ANDROS, friends of HIPPOLYTUS

MESSENGER

THESEUS—*Old, powerful, heroic in appearance*

ARMED ATTENDANTS of THESEUS

[CHORUS—THE THREE POOR WOMEN—ENTER FROM THE RIGHT,
ALONG A CURVING PATH THAT GOES NEAR THE ALTAR BEFORE
IT REACHES THE HOUSE]

FIRST WOMAN

We have never quite starved, thanks to some god or other: but my
husband has had no work since New Year's.

SECOND WOMAN

Don't be troubled, darling. You are still young enough to attract a
lover from time to time. Some kindly old gentleman . . .

FIRST WOMAN

How you talk!

SECOND WOMAN

A piece of fish or a pound of olives, if not a copper coin.

THIRD WOMAN

My husband has plenty of work, and well-paid too; but he drinks
every penny. I don't think we could live without these hand-
outs from the palace.

[THEY ARE APPROACHING THE ALTAR]

FIRST WOMAN

We have still a handful of meal in the bin . . . [SHE THROWS HER
HAND TO HER HEART, STARING AT THE ALTAR, AND STEPS BACK-
WARD] Oh—hush!

THIRD WOMAN

[STARING AND RETREATING] I feel it too!

FIRST WOMAN

Something divine is here. There was such a dizziness at my heart
suddenly . . .

The Cretan Woman

THIRD WOMAN

I feel my eyes dazzle and my knees tremble.

SECOND WOMAN

Did you feel something? It is the great Goddess—Aphrodite—*her* altar.

FIRST WOMAN

[HER HAND AT HER THROAT] Walk wide of it! She is angry. There is a divine anger in this place: like the glaring eyes Of a wild beast. Yet she is kind, we know . . .

SECOND WOMAN

What I felt—like an earthquake. Something has roused her.

[THEY TIPTOE AT DISTANCE AROUND THE ALTAR AND APPROACH THE DOOR OF THE HOUSE]

FIRST WOMAN

[SPEAKING LOW] I hope that all's well in this great house. The Goddess doesn't waste wrath on poor people.

THIRD WOMAN

I am still afraid. Terribly. I feel the power . . .

SECOND WOMAN

If this great house ever falls—I wish it no evil—I wish my boy had the looting of it.

FIRST WOMAN

The door is tight shut, and I dare not knock. Make a little music on that zither of yours, Cleone. But softly.

[THIRD WOMAN PLUCKS THE STRINGS OF HER INSTRUMENT; A

The Cretan Woman

LOW MUSIC IS HEARD. THE DOOR OPENS PARTIALLY; SELENE SPEAKS THROUGH THE OPENING]

SELENE

[INTENSELY WHISPERS] Go away. Be quiet.

FIRST WOMAN

Our children are hungry. Have you nothing for us today?

SELENE

Be off. Let my lady sleep.

FIRST WOMAN

Not even a spoiled cake or a stale crust?

SELENE

[SLIPS THROUGH THE DOORWAY AND STANDS ON THE THRESHOLD, CLOSING THE DOOR CAREFULLY BEHIND HER] Will you worry me to death? Be quiet, women.

My lady is ill; she never closed her eyes all night long,
And has just fallen asleep. She has been delirious, I think.
I have been beaten like a fluttering bird, all night and day,
In the storm of her mind.

FIRST WOMAN

What is it, a fever?

SELENE

And for three days she has
not tasted food.
Oh, I am weary!

SECOND WOMAN

You mean there was food and she wouldn't eat it!

The Cretan Woman

S E L E N E

She is like someone possessed

By an angry god.

T H E W O M E N

[STARTLED, LOOK SIGNIFICANTLY AT EACH OTHER, AND BACK
TOWARD THE ALTAR] Oh!

F I R S T W O M A N

What goddess?

S E L E N E

A divine power—how could I know? There is a
mystery . . .

In the delirium, in all the wild rush of her mind
There is something she avoids, something she hides. Like the mad
waves of the sea, moulding but hiding
A sunken reef.

F I R S T W O M A N

I will tell you. We felt the anger—we all felt it—of a—certain
Divine Person
When we approached this house.

S E L E N E

What Person? [FIRST WOMAN SHAKES HER HEAD,
FINGER TO LIPS, AFRAID TO SPEAK] I say what god, or what
goddess? [FIRST WOMAN SHAKES HER HEAD; SECOND WOMAN
POINTS STEALTHILY TOWARD THE ALTAR]

S E L E N E

There? Aphrodite? That's out. Or it has nothing to do with my
lady Phaedra.
She is loving and good, and she neglects no divinity.

The Cretan Woman

And faithful to her dear husband, my lord Theseus: almost too faithful

To be a woman. Oh, what a time I've had
Trying to make her eat, cooking things . . .

SECOND WOMAN

[HUNGRILY] What kind of things?

SELENE

Little Cretan cakes, for instance. Brown spice, golden honey, a whipped egg . . .

SECOND AND THIRD WOMEN

Oh! Oh!

SELENE

I thought perhaps she was homesick for the dear island
Where she was born. That's what they eat there.
She poured the dish on the floor when it came in . . .

SECOND WOMAN

Oh!

SELENE

And the slaves had them.

Worse than that:

Once she called for raw meat, flesh with the blood, like a northern barbarian: she, royal-born,

Of the most highly cultured family in Europe! and naturally
Shrieked when the mere smell . . . [LISTENING] Oh dear! Is she
calling me?

Is she awake?

[THE DOOR OPENS AS SHE TURNS TO IT. PHAEDRA STANDS IN THE DOORWAY; A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN WOUND CARELESSLY IN A CLOAK, HAGGARD BUT ROYAL. SELENE STEPS BACK FROM HER]

The Cretan Woman

S E L E N E

My lady!

[PHAEDRA STANDS BEWILDERED, GAZING AT THE WOMEN AND THE SCENE. HER LIPS MOVE, BUT WITHOUT A VOICE. FINALLY SHE SPEAKS ALOUD, SLOWLY AND CLEARLY]

P H A E D R A

I will not shame myself. I will not defile this house.

S E L E N E

What are you saying?

P H A E D R A

I will not.

And you, be silent. You are my servant, I think. What's your name? Selene? My poor Selene.

[SHE GAZES FROM ONE TO OTHER OF THE WOMEN]

Who are all these women, Selene? So many and so very many and such proud faces?

Are you the queens of the East that have come to comfort me?
I will die sooner.

S E L E N E

You are ill, my lady. You are weak, trembling with fever: come back, dear,
Into the house.

P H A E D R A

[STEPPING DOWN FROM THE DOORWAY] Not at all: I will walk in my lovely garden: up and down: and feel the warm sun . . . [SHE SHUDDERS VIOLENTLY]

They say death's bitter cold. Ah? You beautiful haughty queens, I shall soon know. [SELENE SUPPORTS HER AS SHE MOVES FORWARD. THE WOMEN FOLLOW]

The Cretan Woman

PHAEDRA

[TO HERSELF] I'll tear it out of me. Tear. *Tear*, you know:
like a barbed spearhead
Out of my bitter heart. [SHE SHUDDERS] Bitter cold: bitter heart:
my bitter longing. The bitter end.
What a queer word!

FIRST WOMAN

She is going straight toward the goddess.

SECOND WOMAN

The altar: see? Like
a gray moth
To candle flame. Like a sleepwalker.

FIRST WOMAN

Let us go back to the
great door, Cleone,
And see if we can get something.

[THEY RETURN TO THE DOOR, BUT OFTEN LOOKING BACK TO SEE
WHAT HAPPENS. THIRD WOMAN PLAYS HER ZITHER. PRESENTLY
THE DOOR HALF OPENS, THE BASKET IS PASSED THROUGH IT.
MEANWHILE PHAEDRA MOVES HELPLESSLY TOWARD THE ALTAR]

SELENE

[TRYING TO DRAW HER ASIDE] This way, my lady: the path is
better.

PHAEDRA

Let me alone, woman.
I will pray here: it seems to be a religious place. I cannot well
remember . . .
There are so many gods in so many places . . .

SELENE

Do not go near it!

[SHE REACHES OUT HER ARMS IN VAIN; PHAEDRA BLINDLY MOVES ON. BUT SUDDENLY JERKS AND STIFFENS, THROWING HER HEAD BACK]

PHAEDRA

[IN A STRANGLER VOICE] This is the one! [RETREATING] The awful power

That has me in hand. The goddess of love and longing, cruel, cruel and beautiful. I may as well confess now.

The crime is not great if I will not yield. —It is my husband's son by that Amazon woman.

It is Hippolytus.

I have long loved his beauty: but now the goddess has thrown stark madness

Into my heart: *I want. I want . . .* I will never yield to it.

SELENE

You—are in love with—

Hippolytus?

PHAEDRA

If you call it love!

This loathsomeness in me. This disease. This burning shame.

[DAZED, LOOKS AROUND] Why, where have my great queens of the East gone to? [LAUGHING]

They thought I meant it! They thought I didn't know a beggar-woman

From a great queen!

SELENE

[POINTING] They are at their trade yonder. [THOUGHTFULLY] Hippolytus . . .

Is not the kind of young man for any woman to love.

PHAEDRA

What?

SELENE

[WITH SLOW EMPHASIS]

He does not care for
women.

PHAEDRA

I am glad of that. Why should he waste himself? Cold, proud and
pure. —I'm going in, Selene.
Oh, I am tired of the light. I have a cold edge in me
That thinks it is worse than evil; it is ridiculous. —Like all our
miseries! —Will you come?
—And of course you understand that this is secret; and we'll never,
never, speak of it again. I shall not live long.

SELENE

You are better for having told me, dear. You walk more firmly; you
have faced the truth . . .

PHAEDRA

Be silent, will you!

I have not faced the truth but an idiot deception, a great false fire
in the fog
On a phantom coast. —If decency and common shame were out
of the question—For I love his father,
My husband Theseus. It is not even *possible* to love two men. I
know how my heart lighted up
When I came down the plank from the Cretan ship and saw him
—tall, fierce and tender, there waiting for me,
In the dirty-cluttered Athenian harbor among the sailors—like the
temple of a god
On a high rock. For I love him, you know! Theseus I love. I have
been fighting myself . . .

The Cretan Woman

He is—not young—if any person he loves should betray him . . .

When anyone's very young he can slide

From one lust to another, nothing is mortal: but a fierce man of war growing grizzle

Under the helmet: I know him: if anyone should betray him even in thought,

He'd hate the world. —And when I look at . . . his son . . . my eyes

Scald with the stupid tears. —Die . . . ah? No choice.

[QUIETLY] I am going in to hide myself

From the great eye of the sun; I have only one god

To pray to now. Not Love, not Light, not Fortune. Death, tall and silent,

Has a flower in his hand; its name is Forgetfulness.

Its name—we hope—is Peace. [THEY APPROACH THE DOOR] Why, look: here are my gay-colored East-queens!

Have you had good fortune, majesties? [SECOND WOMAN HIDES THE BASKET BEHIND HER] No: show me. [IT IS SHOWN] Poor women: it is not much. May I take a crust from it?

I do not think I have eaten since dawn.

SELENE

My lady!

PHAEDRA

One little crumb. I

have been too proud in my lifetime:

That's a great sin. But now I will beg of beggars, a bit of bread to eat. You are kind, women.

I am truly grateful. [SHE GOES INTO THE HOUSE; SELENE FOLLOWS, WEeping. THE STAGE IS GRADUALLY GROWING DARKER]

FIRST WOMAN

The goddess has unraveled her mind. As if she

The Cretan Woman

were struck by sudden lightning
When she went near the altar.

SECOND WOMAN

[TERRIFIED] The altar! Look!

[THE WOMEN COWER AND SHIELD THEIR EYES. THE GODDESS APHRODITE HAS GLIDED FROM BEHIND A FLOWERING BUSH, AND LEANS HER HAND ON THE ALTAR, HER SPOT OF LIGHT INCREASING. SHE IS TALL AND VERY BEAUTIFUL, MARBLE WHITE AND MARBLE-POLISHED, BUT PERHAPS PALE GOLD HAIR. SHE HAS A SPRAY OF FRUIT-BLOSSOM IN HER HAND, AND PLAYS WITH IT. SHE SPEAKS AS IF SHE WERE ALONE, THINKING ALOUD]

APHRODITE

. . . So I have come down to this place,
And will work my will. I am not the least clever of the powers of
heaven.

[SHE SMILES, FONDLING THE BLOSSOM-SPRAY] I am the goddess
the Greeks call Aphrodite; and the Romans will call me
Venus; the Goddess of Love. I make the orchard-trees
Flower, and bear their sweet fruit. I make the joyful birds to mate
in the branches. I make the man
Lean to the woman. I make the huge blue tides of the ocean
follow the moon; I make the multitude
Of the stars in the sky to love each other, and love the earth.
Without my saving power
They would fly apart into the horror of night. And even the atoms
of things, the hot whirling atoms,
Would split apart: the whole world would burst apart into smok-
ing dust, chaos and darkness; all life
Would gasp and perish. But love supports and preserves them:
my saving power.

This is my altar,

The Cretan Woman

Where men worship me. Sometimes I grant the prayers of those
that worship me: but those who reject me
I will certainly punish. Not because I am angry: love is my nature:
the man who rejects love
Will be certainly punished.

There is a young man here,
Hippolytus, the son of Theseus, who rejects love and disdains to
worship me. Horses, hounds and keen hunting,
And the dear friendship of the young men, his comrades, are all he
cares for.

[BITTERLY] A chaste young athlete. He boasts of it:
That he will never make love to a woman nor worship
The Queen of Love. [PAUSES AND SMILES, ADMIRING THE BLOSSOM
SPRAY] Well . . . I shall have my will of him. The young
man
Will be taken care of. It is not right—nor safe—to be insolent
To a great goddess.

I am a little sorry for the lady Phaedra, his old father's young
wife,
Who must go down into shame and madness to make his ruin; and
I am sorry for the old hero,
Theseus, his father: but to suffer is man's fate, and they have to
bear it. We gods and goddesses
Must not be very scrupulous; we are forces of nature, vast and in-
flexible, and neither mercy
Nor fear can move us. Men and women are the pawns we play
with; we work our games out on a wide chess board,
The great brown-and-green earth. [SHE PAUSES, LIFTS HER HEAD AND
SMILES FRANKLY AT THE AUDIENCE] You are gathered here
To see the game?

Watch, then. I have planted the agony of love in that
woman's flesh, like a poisoned sword

The Cretan Woman

In her beautiful body: and I shall watch unseen, from my altar
here, the sudden accomplishment
Of my planned purpose. The day will be
Today. *This* day. Look: the dark night is passing;
The beautiful feet of dawn come over the mountain, the pale
bright feet sandaled with music,
Driving the gentle stars, like a man frightening
A flock of birds.

[LIGHT INCREASES ON THE SKY AND BACKGROUND, AND COMES
SLOWLY DOWNWARD ONTO THE STAGE. PASTORAL MUSIC OF
FLUTES, INCREASING WITH THE LIGHT. MEANWHILE THE SPOT
OF LIGHT FADES FROM THE ALTAR; THE GODDESS VANISHES. SHE
LEAVES HER BLOSSOM SPRAY ON THE ALTAR]

[THE WOMEN, WHO HAVE BEEN CROUCHING BY THE DOOR OF
THE HOUSE, ARE SEEN CLEARLY AGAIN. THEY MOVE LIKE PER-
SONS AWAKING FROM A NIGHT'S SLEEP]

FIRST WOMAN

[PUSHING BACK HER HAIR] I had a terrible dream.

SECOND WOMAN

A dream? I too!

FIRST WOMAN

I dreamed that a strong flame burned on the stone . . . [FUR-
TIVELY POINTING]

The altar there . . . a white-hot column of fire,
Whirling and smoking: and little men and women were struggling
in it,
Burning alive. Frightful . . .

SECOND WOMAN

I dreamed that a great white cat—a snow-
leopard—

The Cretan Woman

With pitiless glaring eyes and fierce claws unsheathed
Crouched on the altar, ready to pounce . . . on me I thought . . .
Oh, how foolish it is to tell our dreams!
They bring bad luck.

THIRD WOMAN

Not mine, dear. I too had a dream, a pleasant one.
I dreamed that a pure-white dove came down from heaven
And perched on the altar; she had a spray of white apple blossom
In her beak . . . Why, look, look! There it is!
Was my dream true?

FIRST WOMAN

No doubt someone left it there in the evening.
[THE DOOR OPENS, AND THE WOMEN MOVE BACKWARD FROM
IT. HIPPOLYTUS STANDS IN THE DOORWAY, TALL AND YOUNG,
DRESSED FOR HUNTING. HE HAS A SHORT HEAVY LANCE IN HIS
HAND. HE MOVES FORWARD ON TO THE DOORSTEP, HIS HEAD
HELD HIGH, LOOKING AT THE DISTANT COUNTRY. ANOTHER
YOUNG MAN, SLENDER AND RATHER EFFEMINATE, COMES FROM
THE DOOR]

HIPPOLYTUS

How beautiful the early light is; when the mist rises from the
mountain and the lark sings high. Did you bring the heavy
arrows, Alcyon?

ALCYON

Heavy and light, both quivers, for beasts and birds.
My lord Hippolytus . . .

HIPPOLYTUS

Come, come! We have no lords here.
I am Hippolytus: you are my dear friend Alcyon,
My young hunting companion.

The Cretan Woman

ALCYON

I will remember, sir.

HIPPOLYTUS

And no sirs either. Indeed I think I am half a year
Younger than you are, Alcyon.

ALCYON

That's true.

[A THIRD YOUNG MAN COMES INTO THE DOORWAY. HE IS BURLY,
SOMEWHAT OLDER THAN THE OTHERS, HEAVY-SHOULDERED AND
YAWNING]

HIPPOLYTUS

[WITH A GESTURE] Our studious friend,
Andros.

ALCYON

Studious, you call him?

HIPPOLYTUS

Of drinking-songs and merry music. Oh, he's a
student.
What got you up so early, Andros?

ANDROS

The cock crowing: the tall bird that hates sleep.
[HE RUBS HIS EYES SLEEPILY]
We'll eat him, I hope, this evening.

HIPPOLYTUS

[LAYING HIS ARM AFFECTIONATELY AROUND ALCYON'S SHOUL-
DERS] What shall we do with our day, Andros? Do we hunt
again?

The Cretan Woman

The country people say that a great wild boar
Rages in the wood yonder.

ANDROS

All right, all right: I'll risk anything.
I am still drunk . . . with sleep.

HIPPOLYTUS

Or shall we race
Our horses along the shore, where the careful waves
Comb the sand clean and smooth?

ANDROS

Just as you like. But what's happened to you?
Are you in love, Hippolytus? I never knew you
To lack decision.

HIPPOLYTUS

We'll hunt, then. [HE SMILES AT ALCYON, TURNS BACK TO
ANDROS]

I love my friends, Andros . . .
If they are brave and beautiful.

ANDROS

That's good. But pretty girls too,
And tenderly smiling women are worth considering. There is a
kind of an altar over there [POINTING]
You ought to pray to.

HIPPOLYTUS

I? No. I will worship the great Goddess of Love
. . . At a great distance. [HE MAKES A GAY GESTURE OF SALUTATION]
All hail! Hail, Aphrodite! —The truth is:
I am a little cold toward the divinities

The Cretan Woman

That are worshipped at night, with grotesque antics; the Goddess
of Witchcraft and the Goddess of Love . . .

Such a pair! Seriously, Andros:

The world is full of breeders: a couple in every bush: disgusting.

As for me, I'll spend my passion

On wild boars and wild horses.

THIRD WOMAN

I see the blossom spray

Move on the altar!

SECOND WOMAN

I see the glaring eyes . . .

FIRST WOMAN

I see the fire of her anger . . .

HIPPOLYTUS

What are the women singing, Alcyon? [POINT-

ING]

Those poor patched women?

ALCYON

Some uncomfortable old ballad, no doubt.

They are too far away: I can hear the voices

But not the words.

[SELENE COMES AROUND THE CORNER OF THE HOUSE, WRINGING
HER HANDS]

SELENE

I don't know what to do! I know well enough: I must obey my
lady's will. But I'm terribly afraid . . .

[SHE APPROACHES THE YOUNG MEN FROM BEHIND THEM. THEY
ARE LOOKING AT THE BEGGAR WOMEN]

The Cretan Woman

ANDROS

Those three? They come to the house every day with their little basket; they make a music
And beg for food.

ALCYON

[TO SELENE, SEEING HER BEHIND HIS SHOULDER] What is it?

SELENE

I have a message for my lord Hippolytus.

HIPPOLYTUS

[TURNS AND LOOKS DOWN AT HER; SPEAKS IMPATIENTLY] Well, What?

SELENE

From my lady Phaedra . . .

It is private, sir.

HIPPOLYTUS

Speak your message: these are my friends.

SELENE

I should have said

Secret. She is dying, sir.

HIPPOLYTUS

What!

SELENE

I think so.

HIPPOLYTUS

I am sorry that she is ill. Will you go down to the stable, my friends? I'll see you presently,
Or send for you.

The Cretan Woman

ALCYON

[TO ANDROS, AS THEY GO OFF TOGETHER] Bad news comes suddenly!

ANDROS

The mornings are unlucky, boy. We ought to sleep longer.
[EXEUNT]

HIPPOLYTUS

I knew that your lady had been ill, Selene: I never thought . . .

SELENE

It was last night, sir.
She lay like one in a trance, perfectly motionless, drugged with her sorrow, not even breathing . . .

HIPPOLYTUS

What sorrow?

SELENE

I cannot tell you. [A PAUSE] Suddenly—it was near dawn—she started up
With a moan like a scream. She stood like a dim white pillar in the dark room, saying “I can’t die
And I can’t live. Why should I bear this pain forever in silence?”
It was pitiful, sir.

HIPPOLYTUS

Certainly. But what can I do?

SELENE

She made me comb her bright hair, “to look well,” she said,

“When I am cold. For I am the daughter of a great man, and the wife
Of a great man.” And now for hours
She has walked back and forth, back and forth, moaning. This is
the restless agony that comes when death
Is at the door.

[PHAEDRA COMES INTO THE DOORWAY; PALE, CALM, SELF-POSSESSED; CLOTHED LIKE A QUEEN. THEY DO NOT SEE HER YET]

S E L E N E

She spoke your name once or twice.
Your father is away from home, and in his absence
You are head of the house.

H I P P O L Y T U S

My father will be back tomorrow,
I believe.

P H A E D R A

I do not know
Whether I have to die. I shall soon know.

S E L E N E

Oh, my lady . . .

P H A E D R A

You may go in, Selene.
I shall not need you. [SELENE HESITATES; PHAEDRA COMES DOWN
AND STANDS ON THE LOWEST STEP. SPEAKS IMPERIOUSLY] Go in!
With the other servants.

[SELENE, WRINGING HER HANDS, RETURNS AS SHE HAS COME;
BUT STOPS AND STANDS WATCHING BY THE HOUSE CORNER]

H I P P O L Y T U S

You have been ill, Phaedra.

PHAEDRA

I have been patient,

Hippolytus.

I think we must bear our fates, and accept
What the gods send. They send sickness or health, evil or good,
passionate longing
Or the power to resist it. We have to do
What the gods choose.

HIPPOLYTUS

Not entirely, Phaedra.

We have to *suffer* what they choose: but we control our own wills
and acts
For good or evil.

PHAEDRA

But if one becomes *insane*, Hippolytus? The gods
send madness too. Madness, you know.
And we have to submit. [SMILING SUDDENLY] What a bore these
philosophies are, my dear! Good and evil! We're not school-
children—
Though fairly young still.

HIPPOLYTUS

I am very glad, Phaedra,
That you are not so ill as your woman said. She pretended
You had a dying message for me.

PHAEDRA

Why. Yes. I have. I nearly
Forgot. And I am truly very near to death. It is not well with
me . . . [PRESSING HER HAND BETWEEN HER BREASTS]
In here. [A PAUSE] I am your father's wife, Hippolytus: I love you
I love you very deeply.

The Cretan Woman

It is my duty. —How high and angrily you turn away from me!
That haughty thrust of the chin. I've always noticed
This coldness in you: it grieved me.

HIPPOLYTUS

You are quite wrong. I am
not demonstrative perhaps . . . I have affections
Like other men; or perhaps more than others—and I am very glad
that my father chose
So good and beautiful . . .

PHAEDRA

Let us not speak any more of your father: this
concerns *me*. I only want you
To be kind to me—as I would be to you . . . [SHE BREAKS OFF]
I think so much of my childhood lately,
In the high sacred island, in my father's palace,
Beautiful Crete: we used to play a game there called hide-'n'-seek:
there was room there: one of my sisters
Got lost in the endless echoing corridors, the famous Labyrinth:
we hunted her for hours, we could hear her crying
Pitifully, far off . . . Hunt *me*, Hippolytus!
You are a great hunter, it is your life,
Hunting wild beasts in the black woods: can't you hear me crying?
I am lost, I am lost, I am crying
Pitifully . . .

HIPPOLYTUS

I am bound to honor you: I cannot understand you clearly.

PHAEDRA

You cannot understand?
No, you can't understand. You know the secret ways of the deer
on the mountain; you know where the wolves run;

The Cretan Woman

You know on what rock over what hidden water deep in wet
woods the spotted lynx

Watches, and her wild topaz eyes

Burn like twin fires in the green twilight, flaming for blood:—but
what a woman wants . . .

No, you can't understand. You think I have something monstrous
hidden in my mind. It is not true.

Kindness I want. Only kindness: Is that a monster? Why do you
hate me, Hippolytus?

All cold, all angry.

[HE TURNS SHARPLY AWAY FROM HER AND TURNS BACK]

HIPPOLYTUS

You are mistaken in that, Phaedra. I have felt
kindness . . . I will confess it:

In my manner I loved you. The way you moved, and your mind
and soul. I have thanked God that my nature

Is not . . . *inclined* toward women: or I might have loved you
Beyond what's right. Oh, I could conquer it: we know how to rule
ourselves, we have self-control; we are not leaves

Blown by the wind!

But it might have been painful.

PHAEDRA

So I am to suffer all the pain,

And you go free! —The battle-captain of those grim warrior-
women, the breastless Amazons,

Was your mother: your father conquered her with his sword and
his spear, he clubbed her down and she hated him . . .

And he raped her. *You* were born of that horror: no wonder

You distrust love! —Listen to me. I am a civilized person, Hip-
polytus, in exile here

Among savages: the fierce little cutthroat tribes of Greece, feudists
and killers. Lovers of tragedy! —We Cretans

The Cretan Woman

Love light and laughter. We like things refined and brilliant; bright
games, gay music, brave colors. We have girl-acrobats
Who ride wild bulls, diving over the horns, blithe on the snout of
death: *our* courage, that hates no person.
—I tell you, Hippolytus, there are two heads of civilization on earth:
Egypt and Crete: but holy Egypt
Is so old, so old, stone-stiff and pious
In the petrified desert: we Cretans
Can be passionate still. We have hot blood, we love beauty, we
hate bigotry,
We know that good and evil and virtue and sin—are words, tired
words: but *love* is more beautiful than sunrise
Or the heart of a rose: the love of man and woman can be more
beautiful than the great-throated nightingale
Her heartbreak song: when all the leaves of the trees hang still to
hear it, and the stars in hushed heaven
Hold their breath and lean lower. —Ours could be. *Our* love could
be.

[THE THREE WOMEN HAVE COME NEAR THEM TO LISTEN]

HIPPOLYTUS

I say keep your tongue carefully.
If you have evil thoughts do not speak them. [POINTING] These
peering creatures have ears
Under their hair.

PHAEDRA

[STARING WITH DAZED EYES AT THE WOMEN] There are people
here? Why—*who cares?*—not I. Listen, women:
I have put all my life on this little hope—and I think I am losing
it—
I am no doubt a dead woman talking to you: Theseus will kill me
If this man will not—but I am not ashamed of this little hope, I
will not hide it, I will sing it aloud
From the tops of the houses . . .

The Cretan Woman

HIPPOLYTUS

Have you gone mad?

[SELENE, WHO HAS BEEN WATCHING, RUNS TO HER]

FIRST WOMAN

We are your friends, my lady.

What wrong is done you?

PHAEDRA

[TO HIPPOLYTUS, IGNORING THE WOMEN] Mad—if you like—
more or less— But not so mad as a rabid dog in the dog-days,
in the white of summer,

Slavering and snapping . . . And not so mad as my mother who
went insane with love of a black bull,

That snuffing horror:—I know well enough

All the shames of my race; the slaves used to whisper in the dark
arches . . . There is a goddess, Hippolytus,

A terrible one: she rides me . . .

SELENE

[CATCHING HER ARM, TERRIFIED FOR HER] Hush! Hush!

PHAEDRA

Merciless, with quilt

and spur . . . She is like a leopard

That has leaped on a deer: the great hooked claws drag through
the tender flesh: the young doe staggers

Under that weight of pain, sobbing and running— Forgive me: I
do not want to seem pitiful—

She is called the Goddess of Love, that merciless one— I cannot
help myself—forgive me . . . [SOBS, HIDING HER FACE FROM
HIM]

SELENE

My lady!

For God's sake, hush!

HIPPOLYTUS

Let her go on, woman. Let her speak it all out,
all her stark madness:

And I shall be proved innocent. There are witnesses . . .

Now: and if the woman wants to destroy herself, let her do so.

My patience has reached an end.

PHAEDRA

Be careful! You are not perfectly sure of being
proved innocent, Hippolytus.

A black thought crossed my mind—like a vulture

Across a window—but I'm not mean enough—

Oh, be at rest, fear nothing. I have degraded myself already

Beyond all bounds.

SELENE

[HER ARM AROUND HER] Come into the house, dear. My dar-
ling . . . my precious . . . [PHAEDRA SHAKES HER OFF]

PHAEDRA

Keep off me, will you! [RAISES HER HEAD PROUDLY]

As I was saying, this goddess—

I was speaking of one of the powers of Heaven, I think? Some
divine one . . . My mind goes black suddenly

From time to time . . . [SHE DRAWS HER HAND OVER HER EYES]

This goddess, the Cyprian, the sweetly smiling white Aphro-
dite—

She was born of the sea, and the sea's treachery

Is in her blood: she has broken my little boat—no more of that!—
she has the sea's sucking whirlpool

In her white body: *all* women have: it wants . . . it wants . . .

As for me:

I am a little mad, as you say. —You breed horses, Hippolytus?

HIPPOLYTUS

[TURNING FROM HER] Observe her, women.
And if you are called in witness, report it. She is clearly insane; not responsible; not to be blamed.
As if some raging alien spirit overpowered her: demon or goddess: Outside her own pure heart. You know the taint in the blood—
curse, if you call it so—
On the royal family of rich Crete—

PHAEDRA

This man so hates me
That he digs up my father and my mother and my ancestors! [TO
HIPPOLYTUS] You have a good lance there:
That boar-spear with the great metal head, your toy that you play
with: will you do me a kindness, fellow?
You say you are not unfriendly to me—Stick it into me! [SHE
KNEELS, TEARS AT THE CLOTH ON HER BREAST]
Here! Here I say. Slake your hate and my love!

HIPPOLYTUS

[GRAVELY, WITH PITY] You see her, women?

PHAEDRA

[STILL KNEELS, HER BODY AND HEAD ARCHED BACKWARD] You'd
better strike: I am growing dangerous.
I am growing to be a poison . . . Oh, my dear, my dear, have pity
on me! I am not hateful yet.
My skin is white, I think, and my mind still clean, and my body
stainless: at least
It is not ugly: my women have sometimes called me beautiful.
Slaves' flattery: ah? Well, not much worse
Than a deer in the woods, or one of those wildcats
You hunt so avidly . . .
This arm seems round and smooth, and the throat's fair enough;

The Cretan Woman

and the clear shoulders: I have no blemish I know of . . .
I am the humblest person alive, Hippolytus,
Here, praying to you.

HIPPOLYTUS

[RELENTING] Let me say this, Phaedra,
And then be silent forever: it is true you are very beautiful; and I
could love you . . . in spite of nature . . .
But not of honor. That holds me.

PHAEDRA

[EMBRACES HIS KNEES] I am so thirsty for you, Hippolytus!
I am burning alive. Forget your father: forget your honor and
mine, what do they matter? Forget
Your impediment of nature. I have put life and death on this
throw of the dice: and degraded myself . . .
I am not insane. I have loved you a long while. I have degraded
myself . . .
Take this degraded body here kneeling to you. Do what you like:
love it or kill it. Oh . . .
Lift it up: love it! [SHE EMBRACES HIS KNEES]

HIPPOLYTUS

Shameless: take your hands from me. Stand up,
will you! It is not my intention
To be made publicly ridiculous. [TO SELENE] You there! Uncoil
your madwoman: she wearies me.
Nurse her into the house.

PHAEDRA

[STANDING UP] I do not need
Anyone's help. And I am not a weeper, either. I've played my life
and lost, and here's death—
Without a tear. —Very well: go back then:

The Cretan Woman

And hunt your beasts. Ride with your laughing boys. Run your
fleet horses. It is possible some pointed thing
Will fly after you.

HIPPOLYTUS

[TURNING TO GO] There is nothing so unclean as madness.

[TURNING BACK TO SELENE] Watch your mistress carefully:
Not to do herself harm. [HE GOES TOWARD THE REAR]

PHAEDRA

Me? Let him watch his own disaster!

ANDROS

[COMES FROM THE TREES IN THE DISTANCE; STOPS AT SIGHT OF
HIPPOLYTUS] Oh, are you coming?

We waited long for you: horse, hound and man too. Is the lady
really so ill?

HIPPOLYTUS

[SHAKING HIS HEAD, JOINING HIM] Very ill, very ill.

Ask me no questions, Andros: the best is silence.

I am sorry for her. —Are Alcyon and the others there?

ANDROS

Fussing with dog-leashes. . . .

[THEY GO OUT TOGETHER]

[MEANWHILE PHAEDRA HAS FALLEN ON THE DOOR STEPS, IN
SPITE OF SELENE SUPPORTING HER. THE WOMEN STAND WATCH-
ING]

FIRST WOMAN

This is the worst thing that can happen to a woman: when love
meets contempt.

[PHAEDRA'S BODY JERKS AS UNDER A WHIPLASH. SHE HALF
RAISES HERSELF]

The Cretan Woman

PHAEDRA

Contempt. I know: contempt—
Is for the fallen. Not alone I will fall.

SECOND WOMAN

To give gold for sawdust, and
love for light ashes—
Is woman's fate. To give her dear fragrance for a dog-bite . . .

PHAEDRA

[SITTING ON THE STEP] He said: "Keep your hands off me."
[LOOKING AT HER HANDS] Rejected: you pale things: I will
send rougher hands
Than these poor lilies. [SHE RELAPSES ON THE STEP, FACE DOWN,
SOBBING] Ah, darkness, darkness, darkness . . .

SELENE

Hush, child. Oh, hush . . .

THIRD WOMAN

While the young man goes laughing with his companions.

PHAEDRA

He will not last long! —What are you? Spirits tormenting me?
There was a kind of hypocrisy about my passion before. I could
see through it more or less.
Now it's deep, thick . . . I have quite lost myself. [LOOKS DOWN
AT HERSELF. FEELS HERSELF WITH HER HANDS] This thing: this
pitiful flesh: is this Phaedra,
The daughter of the wise ruler of famous Crete?
Or a scorned whore? [STROKING HER HAND DOWN HER ARM] Oh,
here's something. [SHE TAKES OFF HER BRACELET AND FLINGS
IT] Break it in three pieces.

The Cretan Woman

THE WOMEN

[PICK UP THE HEAVY BRACELET, SHOW IT TO EACH OTHER]
Gold, gold. We are rich!

[A MAN RUNNING DASHES ONTO THE STAGE, SPEAKS BREATH-
LESSLY]

MESSENGER

He sent me ahead. I ran faster than the horses.
I heard the wind of their breath blowing behind me.
Is all well here?

[THE WOMEN GAPE AT HIM IN FRIGHTENED SILENCE. PHAEDRA
IN HER BLACK MEDITATION IGNORES HIM]

PHAEDRA

[HER HANDS TEARING AT EACH OTHER] A refused whore! [SHE
GATHERS HERSELF; STANDS UP, COOL AND SELF-POSSESSED] What
did you say? Certainly all is well here. And my lord Theseus
Is well, I hope?

MESSENGER

[WHO DID NOT SEE HER AT FIRST] Oh—Very well, Madam: but
much troubled
By the tone of the oracle.

PHAEDRA

[CALMLY] The oracle—I remember. He went to consult it.

MESSENGER

And it answered . . .

PHAEDRA

You needn't tell me, Messenger. My lord will tell me.

MESSENGER

It answered strangely.
It said that his house was burning, he must hasten home!

The Cretan Woman

PHAEDRA

[EASILY] Did it so? Very interesting.
But you can see there's no fire here: no sort of trouble.
Take the man into the house, Selene. Let him eat and drink.

MESSENGER

No, no. My thanks, Madam. I must race back
To say all's well. [HE GOES]

PHAEDRA

[INSTANTLY DISMISSING HIM FROM HER MIND, RELAPSING INTO
BLACK MEDITATION] A scorned importunate whore: refused
And despised: kneeling, hugging his thighs: let her be hanged.

—And how his young men will laugh!
Between the minstrel's song and the juggler's tricks,
Over the wine.

FIRST WOMAN

Truly his house was burning, and the god knew it.
But that fire's out.

PHAEDRA

Is it out? A worse burns then.
A deadlier fire.

SELENE

No: on the kindly hearth:
The warm life of the house.

PHAEDRA

From the hearth to the roof-beams
This red fire leaps.

SELENE

No. No. No! Women: Will you hear me? I pray
you listen to me.

The Cretan Woman

You are friendly to my dear mistress: you take her bounty: I think
you love her: promise me on oath, women,
Never to speak of what you have seen and heard here, neither to
my lord Theseus nor any other:
Your husbands, your children: not to any acquaintance: never to
whisper it. For gossip and scandalous tongues are worse
Than fire in the roof.

THE WOMEN

I promise. Oh, I swear it.

SELENE

My mistress is pure and good:
you know that.
Our silence will make her well. This wound will heal,
This black storm will blow over.

PHAEDRA

Fool!

SECOND WOMAN

Truly it will, Phaedra! For time,
that eats up our pleasures,
Also mends pain.

FIRST WOMAN

A man crossing the mountain
Feels the cold like a knife
Severing his bones; he sees black abysses
Infinitely far down;
And here the jagged rock-heads, the death-white
Teeth of snow on the rock.
He shudders in the knife-keen wind.
It is death, he thinks.

The Cretan Woman

PHAEDRA

I do not *think*: I *know*
That death is here at hand: but not a clean death.

SECOND WOMAN

From the wide plain looking backward, from the rich plain
The traveler: his mountain
Hangs like a hyacinth bell,
Purple on the pale sky:
The peaks of the rock are like a flower's petals
And the color joyful . . .

PHAEDRA

I am preparing a thing that will *not* be joyful.

FIRST WOMAN

Would God that I knew the joy
Of driving through pleasant valleys in a green land,
As Theseus does: the horses lean on the yoke,
They snort the storm of their breath:
On one side of the way is clear water welling
Cold under willows; behind me white dust
Floats in the sun like a flag;
On the other side of the way is perhaps a hill
Clothed with green vineyard,
The little wax-yellow flowers and the curling tendrils
Like a girl's hair: on high the temple of a god
Lifts honey-colored marble above green leaves.
Happy are the hours there . . .

PHAEDRA

The woman sees happiness.
But as for me, I see shame, I see corpses.

The Cretan Woman

SECOND WOMAN

The girls and young men go up
Singing together, carrying the lamb and the golden corn,
The broad green leaves and the grape clusters,
To the beauty of the god in the blue-veiled autumn . . .

PHAEDRA

I say, be quiet! —How can I endure myself?
He knew me for what I am, and he did rightly
When he despised me. False to the bone. I think too much,
And lose myself among the pictures my mind makes. The core of
me—the—what they call heart—
Hidden and I cannot find it. I feel my mind swooping, I feel the
awful storms of brute instinct,
And between—nothing. —But this I know: I will not betray him.
I will not be false. —As for you, women, I pray you—when The-
seus comes—
Be silent. Cover up my folly. Have mercy on me. Let my name be
remembered
As one who was chaste and faithful, never looking aside from her
one man, and died young,
For no particular reason . . .

SELENE

[FRIGHTENED] He is coming now my lady! Listen: they are
here.

We must be ready, we must smile and be quiet: that's woman's
happiness.

PHAEDRA

Woman's . . . happiness!

SELENE

I pray you, my lady!

The Cretan Woman

PHAEDRA

Let him come.

FIRST WOMAN

[TO PHAEDRA] Silence is God's best gift.

[THESEUS, WITH ARMED ATTENDANTS, COMES RAPIDLY FORWARD]

SECOND WOMAN

I will be silent . . .

SELENE

Lock up your lips, women!

THESEUS

[LOOKING AT THE HOUSE; TO HIS NEAREST ATTENDANT] The house has no damage at all; nor the roof either.

No smoke; no wailing. What did that priestess mean? [SUSPICIOUSLY]

Why are you crowding the door, women?

[THEY MOVE ASIDE, IN SILENCE. THESEUS SEES PHAEDRA, SITTING ON THE STEP, STARING AT HIM] Is it well with you,

Phaedra? [SHE STARES AT HIM, WITHOUT MOVING]

SELENE

[STAMMERING WITH NERVOUSNESS] She has been a little ill. I brought her out for the sun . . .

It is no great disorder, my lord: your absence
Has made her sad.

THESEUS

I galloped home at the full stretch of the horses,
my charioteer

The Cretan Woman

Whipping and shouting: for the oracle
Sang that my house was fired. What has happened?

S E L E N E

Nothing, sir.

T H E S E U S

Why does she not speak then?

S E L E N E

Nothing whatever, sir—
Except my lady's small illness.

P H A E D R A

[STANDING UP, CLEAR AND BITTER] *She lies*, Theseus.

T H E S E U S

What?

P H A E D R A

Evil *has* happened.

The worst and shamefullest.

S E L E N E

[RAPIDLY]

She is full of fever, my lord: her mind wanders
and boggles like a lost bird . . .

P H A E D R A

What a desperate liar! —But it is not her fault: I'll not let any
servant of mine
Be whipped for *me*. I say the woman is an open liar; but trying to
protect me

The Cretan Woman

From your just wrath. My lord, a common sweating peasant weary
at the plow
Would not endure it.

S E L E N E

Her delirium of fever . . .

P H A E D R A

Silent, you!

Pray to God in your heart.

T H E S E U S

I am not a patient man. I hate the female herd,
that chatters like monkeys
And never speaks.

P H A E D R A

Without chattering, my lord: nothing shrill, no
outcry:
Coldly and clearly: —Your bed is defiled and your house broken.
If I should bear a child,
It will not be yours.

[THESEUS DRAWS HIS SHORT SWORD HALF WAY FROM THE
SCABBARD, AND SLAMS IT BACK AGAIN; STAGGERING WITH RAGE]

T H E S E U S

Go on. Speak.

P H A E D R A

This defiled body
Is waiting for you to scour it with sudden death.

T H E S E U S

Go on. Speak more.

The Cretan Woman

PHAEDRA

Its

woman-weakness met violence
In the bed of shame.

THESEUS

So you say. They all say that. —Who was the
man?

PHAEDRA

It is

true, my lord.
See on my throat the marks of his strangling hands.

THESEUS

I do not see them.

[SHOUTS] *Who?*

PHAEDRA

A man well known to you.
Now give me death, Theseus.

THESEUS

Presently perhaps. Who was it? [NO ANSWER]
Who?

PHAEDRA

I will not tell you.

THESEUS

White fool—
Will you drive me mad?

The Cretan Woman

PHAEDRA

No. *He* was mad, I think. I will be silent.
I will not drive you mad: you'd run stark raving
If I answered you.

THESEUS

You'll answer, you'll answer. You cheap toy—broken trinket—mud-
trampled rose-petal—
I have to kill a swine: *what* swine?

PHAEDRA

You have killed too many men, Theseus, fa-
mous for blood. Your hands stink of it.
I noticed that.

THESEUS

[SHOUTING] Who was it?

PHAEDRA

No matter how well you wash them, Theseus.
—I'd sent my woman away
Because her breathing made a noise in the night. I was alone,
Naked in bed, half asleep: the door moved on its well-oiled hinges,
and that young man
Stood in the room.

THESEUS

[BLACK WITH RAGE, CONTROLLING HIMSELF] Patience. Patience.

PHAEDRA

I saw
him well: there was a night-lamp:
And he told me his name. He said that something deadly had hap-
pened, and he had to speak to me.

The Cretan Woman

I knew him well, Theseus; I perfectly trusted him;
I let him come near the bed. When your wrath cools
I'll speak his name. It is one you trust. He held a knife at my
throat—
And . . . did . . . his will. I was too weak and cowardly to cry
to the slaves. I pled with him.
I wept and pled: saying, "Though my life and honor are nothing
to you,
Will you dishonor your father Theseus, whose wife I am?"

THESEUS

[SHOUTING] Agh! —No. —What were you saying?
What did you say, Phaedra?

PHAEDRA

That my prayer was vain. He was like a beast,
like a wild beast.
[COLDLY] That is his nature.

THESEUS

[DRAWING HIS SWORD] You dirty leavings. —You say that my
son Hippolytus—

PHAEDRA

I will not send the father against the son.
I never named him.

THESEUS

—took you by force? Raped you? Oh, lying
fool—
Tell me something true once!

SELENE

[SCREAMS SUDDENLY] Ai! [SOBS] Oh, oh . . .

The Cretan Woman

PHAEDRA

[COLDLY WATCHING HER] These women know it.
They will probably lie, to cover it.

THESEUS

Who caught you at it? Who?

That woman?

[INDICATING SELENE]

You'd not tell but for that.

PHAEDRA

No one. They slept. But I being mad with grief
and my life is death—
I told them.

FIRST WOMAN

We saw her making lamentation, sir.
This morning. Weeping and crying.

THESEUS

You repented—ah?

You tempted him, you perverted him, handled him, slavered on
him—

And you repented. [PAUSE] I don't believe it.

Somebody caught you at it: you wept for *that*. [COVERING HIS
EYES]

—My own loved son.

FIRST WOMAN

Oh, she is not to blame, sir, not to blame; guilt-
less. It was her misfortune
But not her crime.

THESEUS

Call it *misfortune* do you, foul-mouth?
You prim-tongued fool! Misfortune! God help me hold myself!

The Cretan Woman

I want to go stabbing, stabbing, stabbing . . . [TO HIS NEAREST ATTENDANT] Bring him in!

ATTENDANT

What, sir?

THESEUS

Bring him in. He is either hunting or about the place somewhere . . . [PHAEDRA SMILES A LITTLE]

THESEUS

[GRIMLY SELF-CONTROLLED] I will not enter my house Until I've cleaned it.

ATTENDANT

We'll find him, sir. [HE AND ANOTHER GO OUT]

THESEUS

Take men with you. Bind him
if he resists.
But wound him not.

ANOTHER ATTENDANT

[AN OLD MAN] Take heed, my lord, not to judge rashly.
We know
That all women are liars.

THESEUS

Not to their own hurt.

OLD ATTENDANT

Even to their own hurt, my lord.
And your son, we know, dislikes women . . .

The Cretan Woman

THESEUS

Therefore he did it.

Pure hatred. Pure evil.

PHAEDRA

[ALMOST BRIGHTLY] How many people have you killed in all your life, Theseus? Three hundred?

With your own hand?

That's what they call a hero. That's what they call a great man.

Kill, kill, and kill:

They put up statues. But spare your son, Theseus,

Though he is vicious: a beast, an evil beast: you twisted his name out of me . . .

THESEUS

[IGNORES HER; SHEATHES HIS SWORD; HIS EYES ROVE ABOUT THE SCENE; FASTEN ON THIRD WOMAN] You with the zither.

You patched thing. Make music.

THIRD WOMAN

Me, sir? It is vile music, sir, dog's music—

And we are so broken with the woe of this house . . .

THESEUS

[BOTH HANDS ON HIS TEMPLES, HIS BODY TENSE AND WRITHING]
Play!

PHAEDRA

It will not heal your wound, Theseus.

Only blood heals . . . *your* wounds.

THESEUS

It will pass the interval. You have half an hour,

I believe, of life yet.

Before your breath stops.

The Cretan Woman

PHAEDRA

[SMILING] But I *wish* to die, Theseus!
[THIRD WOMAN BEGINS TO PLAY]

SECOND WOMAN

I am terrified . . .

[SHE SINGS—OR RATHER SPEAKS, BUT WITH CONSCIOUSNESS OF
THE MUSIC] What is best for a man?

For our human half-darkness under the stars
Is full of evil; grief after grief comes in,
Like wolves leaping the fold-wall . . .

FIRST WOMAN

Silence is best.

SECOND WOMAN

Grief after grief,
Like waves flooding the sea-wall: but wealth could stop them.
A golden dyke: a rich man can buy security . . .

FIRST WOMAN

Then why do the great kings die by violence?

SECOND WOMAN

Pure love is best.
Let pure love be my heaven, and fair love my fortress . . .

FIRST WOMAN

But if you love someone, death comes and takes him.

THIRD WOMAN

[STRIKING THE ZITHER STRINGS WITH HER HAND, BREAKING OFF
THE MUSIC]

Then death is best!

The Cretan Woman

FIRST WOMAN

Death is good in his time.

Silence is best.

THIRD WOMAN

An old old song, my lord. It doesn't make sense—
And I can't help it.

PHAEDRA

See how you've calmed him, women! He has
bitten his lips through, the beard's blood-lined,
Black-red on the grim gray. Why—it's the gnashing muzzle of a
wild boar! Perhaps Hippolytus
Would like to hunt it! —I warned you, Theseus,
Music will never soothe: you didn't even hear them. What your
wound wants for cure is somebody's blood.
Sword's joy: a turn of the wrist—
And the flashing red river.

THESEUS

I have been thinking so. [HE MOVES THREATEN-
INGLY TOWARD HER]

PHAEDRA

The joy of stabbing . . .
[HE COMES TO HER, HAND ON SWORD-HILT] —Me? No! Not
me Theseus! [SHE SHRINKS BACKWARD FROM HIM]
Not me! You are grim, dearest, but you are just. All men have said
That you are just . . . [SHE KNEELS TO HIM]

THESEUS

What a harlot's face you have!

The Cretan Woman

PH A E D R A

Now my life hangs on a hair—

consider yet,

Would I—or any woman—willingly embroil myself with a young man well known

Averse from women? Think what you like of me—dearest, don't strike!—

I am not such a fool. Hippolytus is that sex—higher or lower, I know not, but strange—

That loves its own . . .

T H E S E U S

I'll ask him when he comes. I see you have considered him.

PH A E D R A

Not till you forced me to!

T H E S E U S

It doesn't matter. You'll not be alive when he comes. As you say: It will be a great pleasure. I know that my son Hippolytus is pure and true.

PH A E D R A

[STANDING UP] Very well. I beg no more. How they'll laugh in Athens!

How they'll whisper it here: "That poor Cretan woman! The son wronged her and the father killed her, though innocent. That's what she gets for marrying a deadly Greek!"

I have a strange horror of that gray blade, Theseus: but here's my throat. I am not a coward.

T H E S E U S

[SIGHING] You have a few minutes yet: I'll hear him first. I am just, as you say.

The Cretan Woman

I have lived with some honor and respect. I have led the people
and been true to my friends, and done—they tell me—
Valiantly once or twice. I have been thought of as a man who
could—at least—

Guard his own gear . . . But old age comes, old age comes,
And flies defile us. —Presently you will hear such a slapping of
flies around here—but not Hippolytus,

Not for your weight in lies . . . Oh Phaedra, Phaedra!

This is a dream, not truth. You will wake up and say: “What was
I saying?

It was a dream.” . . . I know you are not false—when I first saw
you—those wide-open shieldless eyes

Full of trust, brave little circles of tender sky—and the soft mouth
that knew not

Whether to laugh or weep, and did both at once—I loved you,
Phaedra, forever.

You were like a small child: a beautiful courageous child . . . [HE
LIFTS HIS HEAD TO LISTEN] Are they coming now? Tell them
it’s over.

It was a dream. —But truly, if my son hurt you . . .

He shall not live.

[HIPPOLYTUS ENTERS. HE MOVES FREELY AND WITH CONFIDENCE. BUT THE TWO GUARDS, WALKING SLIGHTLY BEHIND HIM ON EACH SIDE, LOOK LIKE JAILERS RATHER THAN ATTENDANTS]

PHAEDRA

[CLEARLY AND CAREFULLY] Do you still despise me, Hippolytus?

HIPPOLYTUS

[IGNORING HER]

You have come home, Father: I am glad of that.

But why in anger? —At least your honest idiots, the axemen here,

The Cretan Woman

Seem to believe so . . . Apparently they are right for once. I see
the black
Vein on your brow . . .

THESEUS

[EYES HIM GRAVELY IN SILENCE; TURNS TO PHAEDRA] Is this
the man?

PHAEDRA

No.

THESEUS

What do you mean—no? That you lied? [TREMBLING WITH ANGER
AGAIN]

And now confess it? I will put the matter more plainly:
Is this the man who rode you last night?

HIPPOLYTUS

Are you raving mad, Father!

THESEUS

Someone is going to
die. Not you, perhaps.

PHAEDRA

[TO THESEUS] I have some nerves of decency still: though you
don't think so. I will not talk your sword
Into the belly of your son.

THESEUS

[HIS HAND ON THE HILT] Into your own then?

PHAEDRA

[CALMLY] I am such a coward, Theseus. If I hadn't been a
coward

11536.

The Cretan Woman

I'd have screamed and got help: but he was over me
Like a wild beast. Don't strike, dear! It was he: yes: Hippolytus.
Don't strike!

THESEUS

Do they say I am not a patient man?
Fools! Cold as stone. [TO HIPPOLYTUS] Why were you not hunting
today?

HIPPOLYTUS

She lies, Father: that's clear enough:
Either out of insanity or shaking terror. Shut her up: and tell me
clearly what monstrous thing
I am accused of.

THESEUS

A crime. You are my son, God help me. A crime
that only iron-in-the-guts
Cures. —Why were you not hunting today?

HIPPOLYTUS

Because I did not choose to. I was somewhat
. . . dejected.
I was at the stable: some of the young men went . . .

THESEUS

Dejected?

HIPPOLYTUS

Sad; tired;
sorrowful . . .

THESEUS

Oh! Your exertions
In the night tired you? [MOANING WITH RAGE] Oh, Oh . . . You

The Cretan Woman

. . . blond pillar of righteousness! Filth: filth: filth!
God strike you dead!

HIPPOLYTUS

God is more just, I hope,
Than you are. This is blind nonsense. Have you ever known me
To follow women? As for being . . . tired: a person whom I once
loved and honored had done
A shameful thing. It grieved me.

THESEUS

What person?

HIPPOLYTUS

I cannot tell you,

Father: I am not a tale-bearer.
The thing failed, and is finished.

PHAEDRA

Do you think it is *finished*,
Hippolytus? Love has an end: but deep hate has no floor,
It falls forever. —I say that he had neither shame nor mercy,
Theseus.
He choked me with his claws while his body soiled me.
You take it quietly. It is true you are growing old, Theseus.

THESEUS

Shut your mouth.

PHAEDRA

It is right for a violent man to be very careful
Before he acts.

HIPPOLYTUS

[TO PHAEDRA] I understand you now: clearly. There is not one
hair of difference between the extremes

The Cretan Woman

Of love and hate. They are the same thing, one identical fury.
—This woman is insane, Father.
She is unspeakably false.

PHAEDRA

[QUIETLY AND SADLY] I loved you once, Hippolytus.

HIPPOLYTUS

Yes? *I will tell him.*

PHAEDRA

And you, pitiless,
Came in and robbed me! I pray you, Theseus, to kill me now. You
are a man of blood, as all know.
They say shame dies in the grave. But as for the young man, al-
though he is evil, and has earned sudden darkness:
He is your son, remember.

THESEUS

[SCOWLING WITH DOUBT, LOOKING FROM ONE TO THE OTHER,
LIKE A TORMENTED BULL] The worse. But something holds my
hand . . .

PHAEDRA

He was right, then. He said,
“My father is an old man and will hardly care.”

THESEUS

[SWORD IN HAND] Ah . . . [HE TAKES A STEP TOWARD HIP-
POLYTUS, BUT TURNS TO LOOK WHEN ALCYON CRIES OUT]

ALCYON

[HAS ENTERED IN WILD HASTE, CRIES LOUDLY] What are they
doing to you, Hippolytus?

The Cretan Woman

HIPPOLYTUS

Nothing . . . A little matter
of life and death, my dear.
And honor, as they say—if anything like that is left in this foul pit.
You cannot help me. But wait, for these women may.

ALCYON

[STRUGGLING TO COME NEAR HIM, BUT HELD BACK BY THE
GUARDS] I'll serve you with my life or my death: that much
I know.

HIPPOLYTUS

[SMILES AT HIM, THEN SPEAKS TO THE WOMEN] Women: you
were here this morning, when . . . [POINTING] *she* there
Displayed her shame. I was sorry for it. But now you can bear true
witness. The woman made a shrill noise,
Pitiful and indecent . . . no more of that. Did she say at any time
she had suffered violence?
From me or anyone?
[THEY STAND SILENT, GAPING AT HIM]

THESEUS

Answer!

FIRST WOMAN

[AFTER A MOMENT] Silence is best.

THESEUS

You gaudy dummies, who bribed you? [TO ATTENDANT] Bring
whips!

SECOND WOMAN

[TO HIPPOLYTUS] She begged you to kill her, sir.

HIPPOLYTUS

Did she accuse me of anything?

SECOND WOMAN

She said, "hard-hearted"—

PHAEDRA

He had come to my bed like

a wild beast in rut:

I said, *hard-hearted!* Tell him the truth, women, the truth at last:
that I said

He had destroyed me—that I said he had come . . .

THESEUS

Silent! Let *them* talk.

PHAEDRA

You then, Selenè!

You know well

Whether he had me or not, by force and violence,
the awful night.

SELENE

And from that moment

You have never ceased weeping. Oh, it was cruel! Oh, it was monstrous! I'd gladly cut out his eyes
With my own hand.

THESEUS

[GRAVELY, MOVING TOWARD HIS SON] You have heard your death sung, Hippolytus.

ALCYON

[SCREAMING] It is a lie! Stop! She lies. She'll say anything
To please her mistress . . .

SECOND WOMAN

What the woman says is true, sir,
God's frightful truth. Although I begged her to cover it up with
silence—there is no crime in silence . . .

FIRST WOMAN

It is all true.

ALCYON

[SCREAMING] Stop! Kill *her*: kill Phaedra: *she* is the one . . .
[MEANWHILE THESEUS HAS COME SLOWLY AND FATALLY TO
HIPPOLYTUS]

HIPPOLYTUS

[HOLDING OUT HIS HAND TO WARD OFF THE SWORD; SPEAKING
QUIETLY] They're making a fool of you, Father. —It is bitter
to be killed innocent, by women's lies.

THESEUS

You model of chastity!

[HE SHIFTS HIS SWORD WITH SKILLED SUDDENNESS, DRIVES IT
UNDER THE BRESTBONE, FROM BELOW UPWARD]

HIPPOLYTUS

[BENDING FORWARD AND FALLING] Fool. Oh . . . [SHOCKED
SILENCE; THEN PHAEDRA'S CLEAR VOICE]

PHAEDRA

Do you still despise me, Hippolytus?

HIPPOLYTUS

[STRUGGLING FOR BREATH] Stand off . . . Give me room to
die in . . . [HE RAISES HEAD AND SHOULDERS FROM THE
GROUND: A GASPING SHOUT] Yes!

The Cretan Woman

I despise you. [TURNS PAINFULLY IN SILENCE; LOOKS UP AT THESEUS AND SAYS TENDERLY] My poor father. [HE DIES]

PHAEDRA

[LIKE A BEWILDERED CHILD, QUIETLY, HER HAND TO HER MOUTH] But I love him, Theseus!

ALCYON

[STRUGGLING WITH A GUARD] Let me pass. Let me pass, fellow. Let me at him.

THE GUARD

Watch out: he has
a knife . . .
[A YELP OF PAIN] Ow!

ANOTHER GUARD

[BEHIND ALCYON, BRUTAL AND UNEXCITED] Kill: huh? [HE STABS HIM FROM BEHIND; ALCYON DROPS SILENTLY] Woman-boy, huh? Lie down.

[NO ONE GIVES ATTENTION TO THIS BY-PLAY. THESEUS STANDS LOOKING DOWN AT HIS SON]

PHAEDRA

But I'd have died for you, Hippolytus! Gladly have died for you.
I fought myself—
I tried to save you . . .
He was your best, old man: and so you have killed him. The best
youth in all Greece, beautiful Hippolytus,
Is slain for *me*. I lied, you understand: he was clear: he was pure
as crystal: and any fool but you, Theseus,
Would have perceived it. I ran mad for love of him; I prayed to
him, I pursued him, I hugged his knees—
Here, before these women, in the eyes of the morning—

The Cretan Woman

And he refused me. He loved me perhaps a little: but he was pure
And honorable: so I had you kill him.

It was you I hated, Theseus: an old gray manslayer; an old gray
wolf, stinking of blood, destroyer

Of generations. For fifty years you have been killing the sons of
men—and now your own son.

T H E S E U S

[LOOKS VAGUELY UP AT HER] Pray you, be quiet . . . [HE
LOOKS DOWN AGAIN]

P H A E D R A

You understand you have killed him, Theseus?
Your son is dead: he will never rise again.

Your beautiful son. You killed him. Now *me*, I hope.

[HIS FACE IS CONTORTED; HE SHUDDERS; FINALLY LOOKS UP]

T H E S E U S

You yap at me like a sick hound, and I cannot hear you.

P H A E D R A

I see that you under-

stand though, Theseus. [A PAUSE]

Dull, and a man of blood, easy to fool . . . [A PAUSE]

Your lovely son. [A PAUSE] Hold all the agony you can. Stuff it into
your heart. *Mine's* full. [A PAUSE] Still silent?

You will soon burst, Theseus. [A PAUSE] Perhaps you will kill
yourself. [A PAUSE] Me first, you know.

T H E S E U S

[LOOKS AT HER; RUBS HIS EYES] I have some blood in
them . . .

Dull, and a man of blood . . . Some god came into me;
Some evil god. [HE LOOKS DOWN AGAIN]

The Cretan Woman

PH A E D R A

How cowardly it is in men, to say
That a god did it! *You* did it. [A PAUSE] And *I* . . . deluded you.

[A PAUSE]

Surely you can do it again? For me? [SHE COMES NEAR HIM, PULL-
ING OPEN THE CLOTHING AT HER BREAST] See: deep! [HE
GIVES HER NO ATTENTION]

Not yet? —I am almost a little sorry for us. —I wish the long
black ship that brought me here

Had split on the sharp reef in the raging storm. I wish my bones
were churning unfleshed forever,

White in black water, out of the sun, wide-washed, far-apart,
scattered; and slime-running seaweed—

Those cold black leaves—grew where my blood runs—where my
heart beats—here in the ribs—here—

Where your red sword should rest soon. —You were so beautiful,
Hippolytus, you were so beautiful!

I sought you as a brown moth seeks the bright flame: or as the
young darkness

Loves the evening star: or a starved beast his prey. I was that
beast. On my knees I hunted you.

You have died: who can live? [SHE HAS APPROACHED THE STEPS, AND
NOW GOES UP INTO THE DOORWAY; GAZES BACK AT THE BODY]

I loved you so.

T H E S E U S

The woman makes a great noise
And it means nothing.

PH A E D R A

Are you beginning at last to understand? Are
you beginning
To *feel* now, Theseus?

The Cretan Woman

THESEUS

[ON ONE KNEE BY THE BODY; SHAKES HIS HEAD IN BEWILDERMENT] I loved him . . .

PHAEDRA

[PITYINGLY] I know. I counted on it.

How wretched I should be if I alone wept! —Stay there and watch him for me, Selene,

And tell me all that he does: his groans, words, grief, outcries and so forth—

And whether he goes wild or not. Watch very carefully:

For he—my husband—is a great man, powerful and pitiable; the glory of Athens and Greece,

Famous into far Asia: and I have almost come to the Greek opinion: that there is nothing

Nobler than a great man in his mortal grief. Or . . . [SHE BEGINS TO WEEP] a loved beautiful youth . . .

Suddenly slain. Oh . . . [SHE RAISES HER HEAD, SPEAKS PROUDLY]

These are the agonies that men remember forever; imperishable jewels of the age; and their mighty spirits

In spite of God live on. As for me—me too perhaps they'll remember—to spit on.

I can't say that I care. As for you, Theseus— [SHE SMILES BRIGHTLY AT HIM, SPEAKS SLOWLY AND LOVINGLY]

Come soon, dear. What else can you do? Weep, and then come.

[SHE STANDS A MOMENT, GAZING, AND GOES INTO THE HOUSE. THESEUS IGNORES HER, CRAWLING BESIDE HIS SON'S BODY. VIOLENTLY TREMBLING HE TOUCHES THE BODY; SHAKES HIS HEAD STUPIDLY. TOUCHES IT AGAIN]

FIRST WOMAN

He will not dare to touch the face.

SECOND WOMAN

He has touched the face.

The Cretan Woman

THIRD WOMAN

He never will dare to kiss it.

FIRST WOMAN

When his mind comes back to him,
Suddenly he will give a great cry,
And spring at us with his sword . . .

SECOND WOMAN

Do you think so!

THIRD WOMAN

And kill us all. [THEY, WITH SELENE, WITHDRAW FROM HIM IN
TERROR, STILL WATCHING. THE GUARDS HAVE ALREADY STOOD
BACK, DRILLED AND IMPASSIVE. THE BODY OF ALCYON IS CON-
CEALED BEHIND THEM. THESEUS IS ALONE WITH HIS DEAD SON]

FIRST WOMAN

He is gazing at him. He has touched his throat.

SECOND WOMAN

He is fondling the bright hair. He is fondling . . .

THIRD WOMAN

He kissed the face!

FIRST WOMAN

He is stroking the cheeks and the bright hair . . .

THESEUS

[LEAPING UP] Quick, you dogs! Help me!
I saw him breathe. The color is creeping back
Into his lips. Bring water and wine and a great linen bandage—
Oh! Did I hurt you?

The Cretan Woman

You'll live, you'll live! [HE HALF RAISES THE BODY; LETS IT DOWN AGAIN; KNEELS BY IT]

FIRST WOMAN

[AFTER A PAUSE] The man you have struck *never* lives, Theseus.

THESEUS

O God of the Sea: *my* God,
My foster-father, God of the high and shining and leaping Sea:
you promised me
You'd answer three prayers of mine, whatever they were. I pray
you all three at once:
Make my son live! *Make my son live. Make my son live.*

FIRST WOMAN

You would have to
pray to the God of Death, Theseus,
Not to the Sea. He has no power in this matter.

SECOND WOMAN

And as to Death: those gray
stone lips
Have never answered a prayer. His ears are stone: men never pray
to him. His cold gray hands implacably
Hold what they take.

[A SCREAM IS HEARD FROM THE HOUSE; RUNNING FEET AND VOICES]

CONFUSED CRIES IN THE HOUSE

Ai! Oh! Oh! Help me. Lift her higher, loose the cord! A knife,
a knife!

[THESEUS, KNEELING BY THE BODY, SEEMS NOT TO HEAR THEM]

The Cretan Woman

SECOND WOMAN

What new horror has happened!

SELENE

[SCREAMS] My dearest! Ai! My baby! [SHE RUNS INTO THE HOUSE]

FIRST WOMAN

[POINTING AT THESEUS] Look, women!
He has kissed the wound!

[A BURST OF LAMENTATION—KEENING—IS HEARD FROM THE HOUSE]

SECOND WOMAN

Listen: do you hear them?

FIRST WOMAN

Someone has died in the house.

THIRD WOMAN

Death in the house: death here. [SHE STRIKES HER ZITHER AND JOINS IN THE MUSICAL LAMENTATION]

SELENE

[COMES FROM THE DOORWAY, STANDS ON THE TOP STEP; CRIES LOUDLY] Theseus! Theseus!

My lady is dead. My lady Phaedra has died. She hanged herself. She knotted the hard cord around her white throat . . . [WEEPS, COVERING HER FACE] Oh, Oh, Oh . . .

THESEUS

[SLOWLY STANDS UP; SHAKES HIS HEAD LIKE A HURT BULL] Be silent, yelpers.

You howlers in the doorways— [SHOUTING] be silent!

[HE LOOKS ALL ABOUT THE SCENE, EXCEPT AT HIS SON'S BODY]

The Cretan Woman

I am not so stupid as you believe. I wish my mother had strangled
me
In the night I was born! I wish the sun had gone blind that morn-
ing. I wish that Aethra my mother
Had pointed her breasts with poison before she suckled me, before
I began to be a slayer of men
And a woman's fool. I say there is no pleasure in it; it is not
delightful
To be old, mocked and a fool. I say that liars have swindled me
out of reason, like a poor old peasant
Duped in the market; they have diddled him out of his land and
his cows and his very teeth—and there they go laughing
And hang themselves. Why did she laugh like that? What did she
mean? I will never draw sword again.
I wish it had turned in my hand and stabbed me, in my first fight:
but now let it stick in the sheath, blackened
With dear dear blood. My enemies will come and mock me, old
and disarmed: I shall say, "Where is my son
To speak to them between the tall stones? Where is my son
Hippolytus
To take my part?" He will lie still, he will not come, he will not
answer. There is a darkness:
And those who enter it have no voice any more; and their hands
and feet
Will not move any more; and the dear flesh falls from the rotting
bones, and the beauty is ugliness;
The brave cold eyes are humbled, the bodies stink. I wish I had
died for them!
They were like two stars in heaven: when the high clouds break
open, and a warm wind
Blows in the dark: but I was easily fooled . . .
And my hand leaped. They were nearly the same age; they were
brave and beautiful. I should have helped her
In her deep trouble.

The Cretan Woman

And all this noise was nothing—froth and a noise—a little noise
in the night. The two I loved
Are gone: that's all. I stand
Between two gods; and my north is grief and my south is wailing
and the children laugh at me.
She was in trouble and I did not help her. Indeed I never under-
stood her; she was too beautiful for me.
Her mind moved like a bird.
And now I have to go down all alone in blood, having lived in it,
alone to death,
Having loved deeply. As to—my dear, dear son . . .
[HE LOOKS DOWN AT THE BODY, GIVES AN ANIMAL CRY OF PAIN,
FLINGS HIMSELF ON THE BODY. THE SCENE BEGINS TO DARKEN]

FIRST WOMAN

A mighty man, like a beaten dog or a shot bird,
Crawls in the dust.
The worst wounds that we suffer we inflict on ourselves.

SECOND WOMAN

Hippolytus was happy.
He had his youth, he did no evil, suddenly he died.
The pity of these things has broken my heart.
[THE SCENE HAS DARKENED TO DEEP TWILIGHT. CLEAR FEMALE
LAUGHTER IS HEARD FROM THE ALTAR OF APHRODITE. LIGHT
SHINES INCREASINGLY ON THE ALTAR; THE GODDESS APPEARS
THERE. ALL GAZE AT HER; EXCEPT THESEUS BY THE BODY OF HIS
SON]

APHRODITE

[LAUGHING] We are not extremely sorry for the woes of men.
We laugh in heaven.
We that walk on Olympus and the steep sky,
And under our feet the lightning barks like a dog:

The Cretan Woman

What we desire, we do. [SHE SMILES] I am the power of Love.

[SHE STANDS SMILING AND CONSIDERING]

In future days men will become so powerful

That they seem to control the heavens and the earth,

They seem to understand the stars and all science—

Let them beware. Something is lurking hidden.

There is always a knife in the flowers. There is always a lion just
beyond the firelight.

[HER LIGHT DIMS OUT AND SHE VANISHES. THE SCENE IS ALL
DARK]

:



DE RERUM VIRTUTE

I

Here is the skull of a man: a man's thoughts and emotions
Have moved under the thin bone vault like clouds
Under the blue one: love and desire and pain,
Thunderclouds of wrath and white gales of fear
Have hung inside here: and sometimes the curious desire of
knowing
Values and purpose and the causes of things
Has coasted like a little observer airplane over the images
That filled this mind: it never discovered much,
And now all's empty, a bone bubble, a blown-out eggshell.

II

That's what it's like: for the egg too has a mind,
Doing what our able chemists will never do,
Building the body of a hatchling, choosing among the proteins:
These for the young wing-muscles, these for the great
Crystalline eyes, these for the flighty nerves and brain:
Choosing and forming: a limited but superhuman intelligence,
Prophetic of the future and aware of the past:

The hawk's egg will make a hawk, and the serpent's
A gliding serpent: but each with a little difference
From its ancestors—and slowly, if it works, the race
Forms a new race: that also is a part of the plan
Within the egg. I believe the first living cell
Had echoes of the future in it, and felt
Direction and the great animals, the deep green forest
And whale's-track sea; I believe this globed earth
Not all by chance and fortune brings forth her broods,
But feels and chooses. And the Galaxy, the firewheel
On which we are pinned, the whirlwind of stars in which our sun
is one dust-grain, one electron, this giant atom of the universe
Is not blind force, but fulfils its life and intends its courses. "All
things are full of God.
Winter and summer, day and night, war and peace are God."

I I I

Thus the thing stands; the labor and the games go on—
What for? What for? —Am I a god that I should know?
Men live in peace and happiness; men live in horror
And die howling. Do you think the blithe sun
Is ignorant that black waste and beggarly blindness trail him like
hounds,
And will have him at last? He will be strangled
Among his dead satellites, remembering magnificence.

I V

I stand on the cliff at Sovranes creek-mouth.
Westward beyond the raging water and the bent shoulder of the
world
The bitter futile war in Korea proceeds, like an idiot
Prophesying. It is too hot in mind
For anyone, except God perhaps, to see beauty in it. Indeed it is
hard to see beauty

In any of the acts of man: but that means the acts of a sick microbe
On a satellite of a dust-grain twirled in a whirlwind
In the world of stars. . . .
Something perhaps may come of him; in any event
He can't last long. —Well: I am short of patience
Since my wife died . . . and this era of spite and hate-filled
half-worlds
Gets to the bone. I believe that man too is beautiful,
But it is hard to see, and wrapped up in falsehoods. Michelangelo
and the Greek sculptors—
How they flattered the race! Homer and Shakespeare—
How they flattered the race!

V

One light is left us: the beauty of things, not men;
The immense beauty of the world, not the human world.
Look—and without imagination, desire nor dream—directly
At the mountains and sea. Are they not beautiful?
These plunging promontories and flame-shaped peaks
Stopping the somber stupendous glory, the storm-fed ocean?
Look at the Lobos Rocks off the shore,
With foam flying at their flanks, and the long sea-lions
Couching on them. Look at the gulls on the cliff-wind,
And the soaring hawk under the cloud-stream—
But in the sagebrush desert, all one sun-stricken
Color of dust, or in the reeking tropical rain-forest,
Or in the intolerant north and high thrones of ice—is the earth
not beautiful?
Nor the great skies over the earth?
The beauty of things means virtue and value in them.
It is in the beholder's eye, not the world? Certainly.
It is the human mind's translation of the transhuman
Intrinsic glory. It means that the world is sound,
Whatever the sick microbe does. But he too is part of it.



LOCAL LEGEND

Two Spanish cowhands from Monterey
Riding, a moonless midnight, to their beds on the coast
Heard a child crying in the pinewood
On the ridge of the Carmel hill; they beat the bushes and found
A naked babe laid on the needle-floor
In the dark screaming. They picked it up, how could they leave
it there?
One of them huddled it under his coat;
They had not ridden a hundred yards when a fountain of fire
Spouted from the babe's mouth: the man
Shrieked, and flung his foundling into the bushes; they never
stopped galloping
Until they'd forded the Carmel River
And let the blown horses breathe. —That is all. The story,
Senseless as other supernaturalisms,
Might even be true, for who would take the trouble to invent it?
But most of us, one time or another,
Have taken unhappy causes or hopes to heart, and gotten well
burnt.



CARMEL POINT

The extraordinary patience of things!
This beautiful place defaced with a crop of suburban houses—
How beautiful when we first beheld it,
Unbroken field of poppy and lupin walled with clean cliffs;
No intrusion but two or three horses pasturing,
Or a few milch cows rubbing their flanks on the outcrop rock-
heads—
Now the spoiler has come: does it care?
Not faintly. It has all time. It knows the people are a tide
That swells and in time will ebb, and all
Their works dissolve. Meanwhile the image of the pristine beauty
Lives in the very grain of the granite,
Safe as the endless ocean that climbs our cliff. —As for us:
We must uncenter our minds from ourselves;
We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident
As the rock and ocean that we were made from.



MORRO BAY

Beautiful years when she was by me and we visited
Every rock and creek of the coast—
She gave life from her eyes. Now the bay is brown-stagnant
With rotting weed, and the stranded fish-boats
Reek in the sun; but still the great rock hangs like a thundercloud
Over the stale mist and still sea.
They say that it swarms with rattlesnakes—right—the stored
lightnings
In the stone cloud. Guard it well, vipers.
That Norman rockhead Mont St. Michel may have been as beau-
tiful as this one
Once, long ago, before it was built on.



OCEAN

The gray whales are going south: I see their fountains
Rise from black sea: great dark bulks of hot blood
Plowing the deep cold sea to their trysting-place
Off Mexican California, where water is warm, and love
Finds massive joy: from the flukes to the blowhole the whole giant
Flames like a star. In February storm the ocean
Is black and rainbowed; the high spouts of white spray
Rise and fall over in the wind. There is no April in the ocean;
How do these creatures know that spring is at hand? They remember
their ancestors
That crawled on earth: the little fellows like otters, who took to
sea
And have grown great. Go out to the ocean, little ones,
You will grow great or die.

And here the small trout
Flicker in the streams that tumble from the coast mountain,
Little quick flames of life: but from time to time
One of them goes mad, wanting room and freedom; he slips between
the rock jaws
And takes to sea, where from time immemorial

Ocean

The long sharks wait. If he lives he becomes a steelhead,
A rainbow trout grown beyond nature in the ocean. Go out to the
great ocean,
Grow great or die.

O ambitious children,
It would be wiser no doubt to rest in the brook
And remain little. But if the devil drives
I hope you will scull far out to the wide ocean and find your
fortune, and beware of teeth.

It is not important. There are deeps you will never reach and peaks
you will never explore,
Where the great squids and kraken lie in the gates, in the awful
twilight
The whip-armed hungers; and mile under mile below,
Deep under deep, on the deep floor, in the darkness
Under the weight of the world: like lighted galleons the ghost-fish,
With phosphorescent portholes along their flanks,
Sail over and eat each other: the condition of life,
To eat each other: but in the slime below
Prodigious worms as great and as slow as glaciers burrow in the
sediment,
Mindless and blind, huge tubes of muddy flesh
Sucking not meat but carrion, drippings and offal
From the upper sea. They move a yard in a year,
Where there are no years, no sun, no seasons, darkness and slime;
They spend nothing on action, all on gross flesh.

O ambitious ones,
Will you grow great, or die? It hardly matters; the words are
comparative;
Greatness is but less little; and death's changed life.



FIRE

Fire flickers on the deep hearth in the dark hall;
The people have left it, no doubt they are sleeping;
Fire all alone: the busy pleasure of its life,
The little blond dancers flinging their arms up,
The gentle roar and incessant rustle and the embers dropping;
The shadows of great gaunt stones in the walls
Dance up and down with it, the shadows of the stone pillars waver
like reeds.
How wise it is, living its rich red life
It cares not where, nor who watches, nor if no one watches.

A campfire in the slit gorge of Ventana Creek
Flickers on smooth bare rock, the foundation of the mountain.
Half a mile higher
A doe looks down from the brink of the upper forest,
Her fawn staggering behind her. She smells a little trouble of
burning,
She sees the black of night stuffing the gorge,
Heavy and solid under the star-gray, black basalt idol
Stuck in split rock, and under it and right through it
A small red point twinkles, terribly alone,
Reddest of stars, deep underneath, deep in the pit.

Fire

She focuses on it her long soft ears, but at that distance
It has no voice.

Or a turf-fire in Connemara,
In the black throat of the hut, between the bog and the sea.
The lean countryman and his toothless old wife
Sit in its feeble glow. Their children have gone away; they think
of past times.

There is another nature of fire, but the same fire,
Slayer of forests: lion-color bulks of flame burst through the trunks
And the trees crash, flame runs like monkeys among the branches,
And the noise is like the roar of a hurricane
On a rock shore; flame flies out of the tops of the trees
Like monstrous bats flapping from peak to peak,
Hissing in the high air. Blue-jay and squirrel,
Wild-cat and coon and wood-rat, man and his cattle,
Are caught alive.

There is another nature of fire; not the same fire,
But the fire's father: "Holy, holy, holy,"
Sing the angels of the sun, pouring out power
On the lands and the planets; but it's no holier
Than a fire in a hut, it is another chemistry,
More primitive, more powerful, more universal, power's peak,
The fire of the sun and stars and the pale sheet-fire
Of a far-off nebula, a mist-fleck at midnight
In the infinite sky; a sworl of a million million suns, dragging their
satellites
Like dark women by the hair
Through the wild acre.

It is with this kind of fire
Our people are playing tricks and will blast their enemies.
How brave we are! I would rather think of the little bale-fires

Fire

That flickered around the night-gleaming Aegean on the peaks of
promontories,
Telegraphing Troy's fall: and that grim Queen had her axe whetted
When the commander of the armies came hulking home.

Fire answered fire,
Blood cried for blood; crime and reprisal, the bomb and the knife,
echo forever
To no atonement:
Until annihilation comes leaping like a black dog and licks the dish
clean: that is atonement.



THE BEAUTY OF THINGS

To feel and speak the astonishing beauty of things—earth, stone
and water,
Beast, man and woman, sun, moon and stars—
The blood-shot beauty of human nature, its thoughts, frenzies and
passions,
And unhuman nature its towering reality—
For man's half dream; man, you might say, is nature dreaming, but
rock
And water and sky are constant—to feel
Greatly, and understand greatly, and express greatly, the natural
Beauty, is the sole business of poetry.
The rest's diversion: those holy or noble sentiments, the intricate
ideas,
The love, lust, longing: reasons, but not the reason.



ANIMALS

At dawn a knot of sea-lions lies off the shore
In the slow swell between the rock and the cliff,
Sharp flippers lifted, or great-eyed heads, as they roll in the sea,
Bigger than draft-horses, and barking like dogs
Their all-night song. It makes me wonder a little
That life near kin to human, intelligent, hot-blooded, idle and
singing, can float at ease
In the ice-cold midwinter water. Then, yellow dawn
Colors the south, I think about the rapid and furious lives in the
sun:
They have little to do with ours; they have nothing to do with
oxygen and salted water; they would look monstrous
If we could see them: the beautiful passionate bodies of living
flame, batlike flapping and screaming,
Tortured with burning lust and acute awareness, that ride the
storm-tides
Of the great fire-globe. They are animals, as we are. There are many
other chemistries of animal life
Besides the slow oxidation of carbohydrates and amino-acids.



THE WORLD'S WONDERS

Being now three or four years more than sixty,
I have seen strange things in my time. I have seen a merman
standing waist-deep in the ocean off my rock shore,

Unmistakably human and unmistakably a sea-beast: he submerged
and never came up again,
While we stood watching. I do not know what he was, and I have
no theory: but this was the least of wonders.

I have seen the United States grow up the strongest and wealthiest
of nations, and swim in the wind over bankruptcy.
I have seen Europe, for twenty-five hundred years the crown of the
world, become its beggar and cripple.

I have seen my people, fooled by ambitious men and a froth of
sentiment, waste themselves on three wars.
None was required, all futile, all grandly victorious. A fourth is
forming.

The World's Wonders

I have seen the invention of human flight; a chief desire of man's
dreaming heart for ten thousand years;
And men have made it the chief of the means of massacre.

I have seen the far stars weighed and their distance measured, and
the powers that make the atom put into service—
For what?—To kill. To kill half a million flies—men I should say—
at one slap.

I have also seen doom. You can stand up and struggle or lie down
and sleep—you are doomed as Oedipus.
A man and a civilization grow old, grow fatally—as we say—ill:
courage and the will are bystanders.

It is easy to know the beauty of inhuman things, sea, storm and
mountain; it is their soul and their meaning.
Humanity has its lesser beauty, impure and painful; we have to
harden our hearts to bear it.

I have hardened my heart only a little: I have learned that happi-
ness is important, but pain *gives* importance.
The use of tragedy: Lear becomes as tall as the storm he crawls in;
and a tortured Jew became God.



TIME OF DISTURBANCE

The best is, in war or faction or ordinary vindictive life, not to take sides.

Leave it for children, and the emotional rabble of the streets, to back their horse or support a brawler.

But if you are forced into it: remember that good and evil are as common as air, and like air shared

By the panting belligerents; the moral indignation that hoarsens orators is mostly a fool.

Hold your nose and compromise; keep a cold mind. Fight, if needs must; hate no one. Do as God does,

Or the tragic poets: they crush their man without hating him, their Lear or Hitler, and often save without love.

As for these quarrels, they are like the moon, recurrent and fantastic. They have their beauty but night's is better.

It is better to be silent than make a noise. It is better to strike dead than strike often. It is better not to strike.



THE OLD STONEMASON

Stones that rolled in the sea for a thousand years
Have climbed the cliff and stand stiff-ranked in the house-walls;
Hurricane may spit his lungs out they'll not be moved.
They have become conservative; they remember the endless
Treacheries of ever-sliding water and slimy ambushes
Along the shore; they'll never again give themselves
To the tides and the dreams, the popular drift,
The whirlpool progress, but stand steady on their hill—
At bay?—Yes; but unbroken.

I have much in common with these old rockheads.
Old comrades, I too have escaped and stand.
I have shared in my time the human illusions, the muddy foolish-
ness
And craving passions, but something thirty years ago pulled me
Out of the tide-wash; I must not even pretend
To be one of the people. I must stand here
Alone with open eyes in the clear air growing old,
Watching with interest and only a little nausea
The cheating shepherds, this time of the demagogues and the
docile people, the shifts of power,

The Old Stonemason

And pitiless general wars that prepare the fall;
But also the enormous unhuman beauty of things; rock, sea and
stars, fool-proof and permanent,
The birds like yachts in the air, or beating like hearts
Along the water; the flares of sunset, the peaks of Point Lobos;
And hear at night the huge waves, my drunken quarrymen
Climbing the cliff, hewing out more stones for me
To make my house. The old granite stones, those are my people;
Hard heads and stiff wits but faithful, not fools, not chatterers;
And the place where they stand today they will stand also
tomorrow.



TO DEATH

I think of you as a great king, cold and austere;
The throne is not gold but iron, the stones of the high hall are
black basalt blocks, and the pavement also,
With blood in the corners:
Yet you are merciful; it is for you we labor,
And after a time you give us eternal peace.

I think of you as a mean little servant, but steward of the estate,
Pale and a hunchback, shuffling along the corridors,
Tapping at every door. You have the keys of the treasury.

You are the arbiter of the games and bestower of prizes.
For you the young men sweat and the boys play battle, for your
award
Their hot young lives: what can they win with their lives—
Whether they bide at home or bleed on the capes of Asia,
Or add columns of figures or the fates of Europe—
But eternal peace?
You sit and watch men fighting, and to you they come.
You watch the victors go home, and to you they come.

You have a sister named Life, an opulent treacherous woman,
Blonde and a harlot, a great promiser, and very cruel too.

To Death

Even the meanest minds after some time
Understand her tricks and her guile. You have a cousin named
Christ

To whom men turn; but presently all to you. To you the conquerors
And to you the pale saints. The lions of the desert
And the sky-swimming eagles flock to your feet. Athens and Rome
Turned to adore you; and America will, no doubt of that:
We are intelligent too; we shall turn and bow down our heads.



THE DEER LAY DOWN THEIR BONES

I followed the narrow cliffside trail half way up the mountam
Above the deep river-canyon. There was a little cataract crossed
the path, flinging itself
Over tree roots and rocks, shaking the jeweled fern-fronds, bright
bubbling water
Pure from the mountain, but a bad smell came up. Wondering at
it I clambered down the steep stream
Some forty feet, and found in the midst of bush-oak and laurel,
Hung like a bird's nest on the precipice brink a small hidden
clearing,
Grass and a shallow pool. But all about there were bones lying in
the grass, clean bones and stinking bones,
Antlers and bones: I understood that the place was a refuge for
wounded deer; there are so many
Hurt ones escape the hunters and limp away to lie hidden; here
they have water for the awful thirst
And peace to die in; dense green laurel and grim cliff
Make sanctuary, and a sweet wind blows upward from the deep
gorge.—I wish my bones were with theirs.

The Deer Lay Down Their Bones

But that's a foolish thing to confess, and a little cowardly. We
know that life
Is on the whole quite equally good and bad, mostly gray neutral,
and can be endured
To the dim end, no matter what magic of grass, water and precipice,
and pain of wounds,
Makes death look dear. We have been given life and have used it—
not a great gift perhaps—but in honesty
Should use it all. Mine's empty since my love died— Empty? The
flame-haired grandchild with great blue eyes
That look like hers? —What can I do for the child? I gaze at her
and wonder what sort of man
In the fall of the world . . . I am growing old, that is the trouble.
My children and little grandchildren
Will find their way, and why should I wait ten years yet, having
lived sixty-seven, ten years more or less,
Before I crawl out on a ledge of rock and die snapping, like a wolf
Who has lost his mate? —I am bound by my own thirty-year-old
decision: who drinks the wine
Should take the dregs; even in the bitter lees and sediment
New discovery may lie. The deer in that beautiful place lay down
their bones: I must wear mine.

