

The Sphinx

— ADAPTED FROM A RETELLING BY ELSIE F. BUCKLEY

This famous Greek myth reminds us that heroes use their brains.

WHEN it happened in times past that the inhabitants of Thebes were plagued by a very troublesome beast, called the Sphinx. This beast had the face of a woman, but the claws of a lion, and wings of an eagle. It lay crouched on top of a rock, halting all travelers who passed by and posing a riddle. Those who answered it could pass safely, but those who failed were killed. And no one had succeeded in solving the riddle.

One day a traveler named Oedipus came to the seven-gated Thebes, where he found all the people in deep distress and mourning because of the terrible monster. Oedipus stood in the marketplace and talked with the citizens.

“What is this famous riddle that none can solve?” he asked.

“No one can say,” they answered. “For he who would solve the riddle must go up alone to the rock where the monster sits. There it chants the riddle, and if he cannot answer, it tears him limb from limb. And if none go up to try the riddle, the monster swoops down on the city and carries off its victims. Our wisest and bravest have gone up, and our eyes have seen them no more. Now there is no one left courageous enough to face the terrible beast.”

“I will go up and face this monster,” Oedipus said. “It must be a tough riddle indeed if I cannot answer it.”

“Oh, overbold and rash,” they cried, “why do you think you can succeed, when so many have failed?”

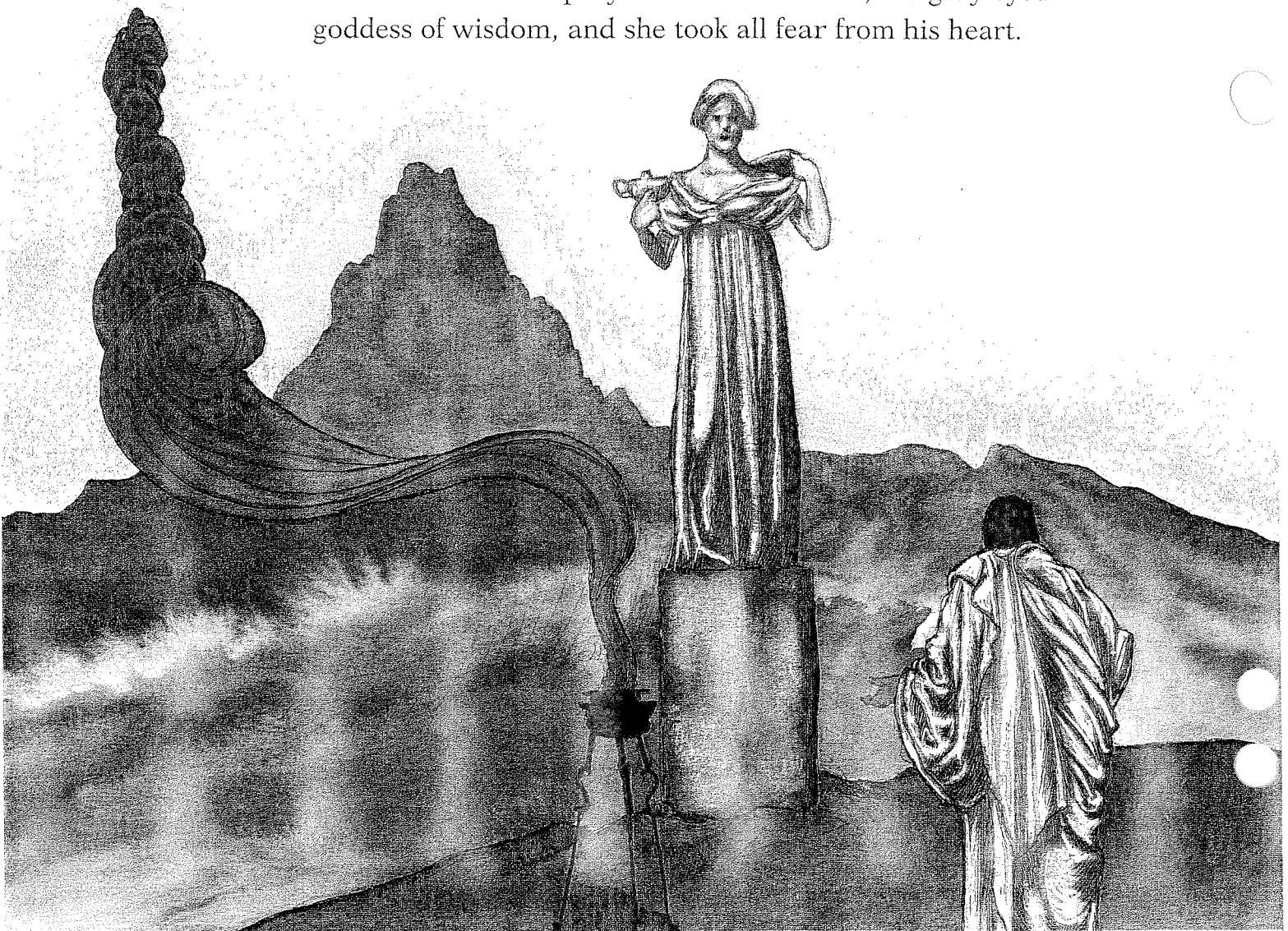
"Better to try and fail than never to try at all."

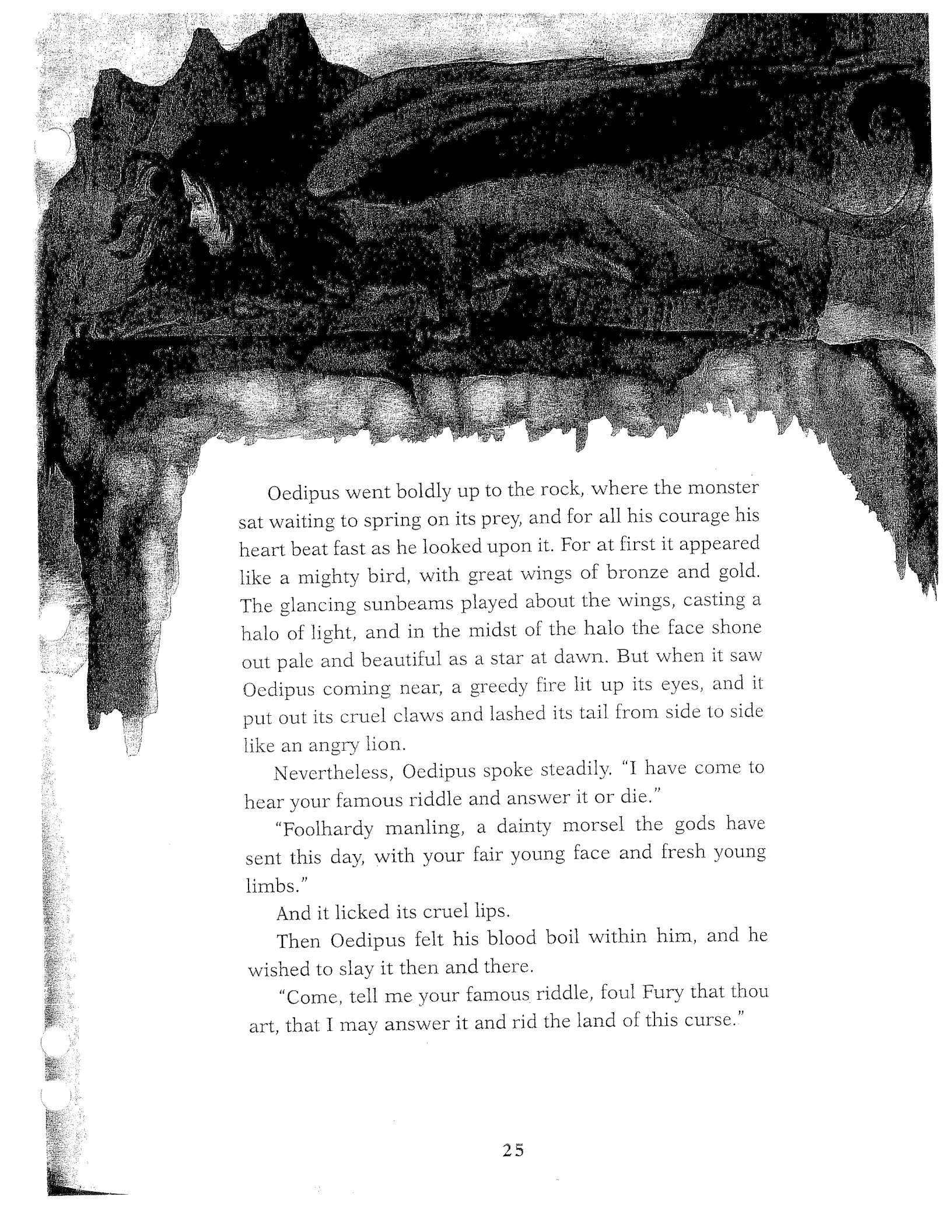
"Yet, where failure is death, surely a man should think twice?"

"A man can die but once, and how better than in trying to save his fellows?"

They marveled at his answer, and seeing that nothing would turn him from his purpose, they showed him the path to the Sphinx's rock. All the people went with him to the edge of the city with their prayers and blessings. At the gate they left him, for he who goes up to face the Sphinx must go alone, and none can stand by to help him.

He crossed first a river and then a wide plain, where the mountain of the Sphinx stood dark and clear on the other side. Then he prayed to Pallas Athena, the gray-eyed goddess of wisdom, and she took all fear from his heart.





Oedipus went boldly up to the rock, where the monster sat waiting to spring on its prey, and for all his courage his heart beat fast as he looked upon it. For at first it appeared like a mighty bird, with great wings of bronze and gold. The glancing sunbeams played about the wings, casting a halo of light, and in the midst of the halo the face shone out pale and beautiful as a star at dawn. But when it saw Oedipus coming near, a greedy fire lit up its eyes, and it put out its cruel claws and lashed its tail from side to side like an angry lion.

Nevertheless, Oedipus spoke steadily. "I have come to hear your famous riddle and answer it or die."

"Foolhardy manling, a dainty morsel the gods have sent this day, with your fair young face and fresh young limbs."

And it licked its cruel lips.

Then Oedipus felt his blood boil within him, and he wished to slay it then and there.

"Come, tell me your famous riddle, foul Fury that thou art, that I may answer it and rid the land of this curse."

And this is what the monster asked: "At dawn it creeps on four legs. At noon it strides on two. At sunset and evening it totters on three. What is this thing, never the same, yet not many, but one?"

It chanted slowly, its eyes gleaming cruel and cold.

Oedipus thought to himself. "Now or never must my learning and wit stand me in good stead, or in vain have I talked with the wisest men and learned the old secrets of Phoenicia and Greece."

The gods who had given him understanding sent light into his heart, and he boldly answered: "What can this creature be but man, O Sphinx? For, a helpless babe at the dawn of life crawls on his hands and feet. At noontime he walks erect in the strength of his youth. And at evening he supports his tottering limbs with a staff, the prop and stay of old age. Have I not guessed the answer to your famous riddle?"

With a loud cry of despair, and answering him never a word, the great beast sprang up from its seat on the rock and hurled itself over the precipice into the yawning gulf below.





Far away across the plain the people heard its cry, and they saw the flash of the sun on its brazen wings like a gleam of lightning in the summer sky. They sent up a great shout of joy to heaven, and poured out from every gate onto the open plain. Some raised Oedipus on their shoulders and with shouts and songs bore him into the city. Then and there they made him their monarch, for who better to lead them than the slayer of the Sphinx and the savior of the city?

So Oedipus became king of Thebes, and wisely and well did he rule, and for many a long year the land prospered.