

IN EYES NOT HIS: NEW GLIMPSES OF BIBLICAL WOMEN

by

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(Under the Direction of Judith Ortiz Cofer)

ABSTRACT

This collection of short fiction and poetry revisits the traditional interpretations of liminal women figures in the Hebrew Bible, focusing particularly on the women of Genesis. Each story and poem is narrated by a woman character.

INDEX WORDS: Biblical women, Biblical fiction, Biblical poetry

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my children—Christopher, Rachel, Phillip, and Matthew—astute readers, generous advisors, and unfailing sources of inspiration. I am grateful beyond words.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	v
1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
2 EVE, REFLECTIVE.....	20
3 AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING.....	21
4 EVE, IN OLD AGE, AFTER ADAM.....	25
5 NAAMAH AND HER BROTHERS.....	26
6 NOAH'S WIFE, WHEN THE FORTY-DAY DOWNPOUR HAS CEASED.....	28
7 NOAH'S ELDEST DAUGHTER-IN-LAW DISEMBARKS.....	29
8 LIKE SPICES FOR THE DEAD.....	30
9 HAGAR SPEAKS OF STONES.....	47
10 HOUSEHOLD GODS.....	48
11 BILHAH, JACOB'S CONCUBINE.....	133
12 ZILPAH, WHO BORE JACOB TWO SONS FOR HER MISTRESS, LEAH.....	134
13 RACHEL IN SHEOL, LAMENTED AND LAMENTING.....	135
14 LEAH AT LAST.....	136
15 SHIPHRAH AND PUAH: MIDWIVES IN EGYPT.....	138
16 RAHAB'S APOLOGY.....	139
17 JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER.....	140
18 JUDGE JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER CONFESSES.....	156

19 HANNAH WISES UP .....157

20 THE SONG OF VASHTI .....158

## INTRODUCTION

After the Beginning; or, How I Came to Be a Writer

Inspired by Genesis

The first two chapters of Genesis contain two different stories of creation. And neither describes how the Divine Being created the world out of nothing. The poets of Genesis depict order being imposed upon chaos: light being separated from darkness, waters being divided from waters, a man being formed from dust. Whatever the capacities of the Divine Being, human imagination can only begin after the beginning—can only shape materials that already exist, can only communicate through reference to shared human experience. In telling the story of how this fiction and poetry collection came to be, I gratefully acknowledge my debt to the Genesis writers. Not only does their work comprise a crucial element of my own raw materials, their writing about creation as a process of differentiations and shapings of already-given matter informs my reflections on the process by which I have formed these “new” stories and poems about Biblical women.

### Forming a Writer out of a Reader

Like many children, I started reading at an early age and grew deeply attached to books. Although I don't remember being encouraged to read, no one dissuaded me, so I read everything from Nancy Drew mysteries to *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Wind in the Willows* to *The Yearling*, *Tarzan* to *Little Women*. I inhaled every fairy tale I could get my hands on, and in the fourth grade, made an astonishing discovery: *Bulfinch's*

*Mythology.* Stories that announced themselves as not rooted in the real swept me into the highest state of readerly joy. And my young mind included the Bible as such a book, but moving toward a different plane because it participated in a paradox: it related wonders and miracles, chronicles of kings and queens, stories of brave prophets surviving lions' dens and fiery furnaces *and* claimed to be "true." I can still feel myself shivering in delighted terror at the prospect of living in the same world where such things had occurred. Who could measure the limits of the possible?

Before reading much of the actual Bible for myself, I delved into the several-inches-thick Story Bible that one of my grandparents had given my older sister and me. Not that I needed additional incentive to read this exciting volume, but I noticed that when Mother saw me absorbed in the big blue Story Bible—with its amazing glossy prints of fierce cherubim guarding the Garden of Eden and King David enthroned with scepter and crown, a lion-rug at his feet (complete with lion's head)—she was less likely to interrupt me with orders to set the table or bring in the clothes from the clothesline. Grown-ups all around me reinforced the significance of the Bible: I heard excerpts read aloud at church and Sunday School, by my parents (usually my father) along with our family's evening prayers, and in the early sixties at Seminole Elementary, we began school-days with a Psalm read by the teacher or a designated student—often me. While falling in love with the stories of the Bible, I was being enthralled by the music and majesty of its language.

Although my mother, a former speech teacher, took care to introduce her daughters to poetry—and especially the pleasures of reading poetry aloud—no verses cast a spell over me as deep and wide as the Psalms, the songs of Isaiah, the Beatitudes,

and the finest passages in the letters attributed to Paul. Who could resist the call to be faithful, to be hopeful, to be kind when it was couched in such language? When I was eleven, I made it my summer project to read the Revised Standard Version from beginning to end, a book a day. I ended up allocating two days each to Isaiah and Jeremiah, but otherwise completed my assignment on schedule. As I read, I circled with colored pencils the familiar passages I found most beautiful so that I could more easily find them again and again. Somewhat uneasy about writing on the pages of the sacred text, I recall deciding that colored pencils would be an acceptable option because the lines could always be erased.

Thus, I became a devoted reader and consumer of the Bible—but that was a long way from using it as the springboard for my own writing. I did write, though. Starting in elementary school, I wrote rhyming poems about a variety of subjects: books, gardens, noise pollution. In junior high, I composed a startling number of verses about futility and suicide. But then my father, a complicated man who occupied a central place in our house and my psyche, noticed that I was spending a great deal of time on this poetry-writing business and told me I should stop. There was no point in it, he said; one couldn't *become* a poet. No one made a living writing poetry—the great poetry had already been written (Milton was his much-quoted favorite). As far as I know, my father, a real estate broker, never attempted writing poetry of his own, but he had somehow contracted a potent strain of pre-Bloomian anxiety of influence. I would be oversimplifying cause-and-effect to claim that extensive Bible-reading predisposed me to be a dutiful daughter, but I did set aside my poetry pen for decades.

The idea of writing fiction never occurred to me as I was growing up, an omission that puzzled me once I finally did start writing in the late seventies. In a literary theory class in 1993, however, I saw my outlook articulated. In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Helene Cixous comments, “And why don’t you write? . . . I know why you haven’t written. (And why I didn’t write before the age of twenty-seven.) Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it’s reserved for the great—that is for ‘great men’; and it’s silly” (309-10). Vertiginous recognition swept over me. That was it—or a close approximation: my own inchoate anxiety. I had assumed that fiction writers, though not necessarily male, must be an exalted order of being fundamentally different from my lowly self. Presuming that *I* might write a story of any value would be silly.

Fortunately, I had not only learned to be a dutiful daughter, I had acquired the habit of being a dutiful student as well. In 1977 I was a young mother of three toddlers trying to finish my undergraduate work at the University of Florida when I enrolled in an honors English seminar: Transformations. Dr. Marie Nelson guided our class in tracing the Beowulf and Arthurian legends through centuries of British and American Literature—from the anonymous Old English poet to John Gardner’s *Grendel*, from Thomas Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur* to Walker Percy’s *Lancelot*. For our final project, we students had two options: we could either write a research paper on a related topic or write our own transformation story based on one of the Arthurian legends. In those days, research meant actual trips to the library, and having three children under the age of four made that prospect a daunting one, so I decided to write my own story (about Sir Lancelot and the Lady Elaine). The experience proved a pivotal one. Eight-and-a-half months pregnant with my fourth child, I found a deep well to draw from in telling the

story of Elaine, scorned by Lancelot and left to bear and raise Galahad on her own. Knowing nothing about how to construct a story, I learned something powerful about how I might construct myself as I sat at the kitchen table into the wee hours of the morning trying to type *softly* on an old mechanical typewriter so as not to disturb the three children sleeping in the next room. Though I channeled my energies into raising children for the next few years, I had irrevocably discovered the satisfaction and possibility of writing fiction, and developed an enduring fascination for writing—and reading—works that pay homage to or otherwise directly respond to prior works.

In another classroom years later—a University of Georgia graduate creative writing classroom in 1998 to be precise—I was finally instructed to pick up the poetry-writing pen I had set down in my youth. Awkward at first, that reintroduction, but it sparked an intense reacquaintance. Professor Judith Cofer required all of her students to craft poetry as well as fiction, and I am grateful.

#### Shaping a Bible Reader into a Bible Appropriator

As St. Paul says, “When I was a child . . . I thought like a child” (1 Cor 13:11a). My naïve appreciation of the Bible expanded, though, when I reached college, took a number of religion courses, and was exposed to the principles of textual, formal, redaction, and historical criticism of the scriptures—not to mention the eye-opening issues of canon-formation. That “the Bible” is not a single canon but exists in various incarnations for the different Christian groups—Protestant, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Slavonic, Ethiopic—complicates its message(s). Increasingly, I became aware that my early attachment to the Bible had really been an attachment to a particular canon,

text, and translation; my understanding of its stories stemmed more from an acceptance of traditional interpretations of meaning than from my own close reading. Later, in graduate school, I would accept as commonplace the notion that an individual never experiences a text—or the world—in a fresh, unmediated way, but that realization was still years away.

In my late twenties and early thirties, as I shared Bible stories with my own children, I found myself reading them more critically, in part because I was seeing them through the lens of increased life-experience, including motherhood. For instance, how should I understand the story of Abraham? The dominant tradition acknowledged him as a model of faith for his willingness to set out on a journey to an unknown destination and settle wherever God led him, as well as for his willingness to sacrifice his son at God's behest. Yet, even setting aside the thorny issue of child sacrifice—a major setting aside, indeed—should not Abraham's exemplary status suffer because he failed to trust that God could give him and Sarah a son—a shortcoming that culminated in the surrogate-mother debacle with Hagar? I encouraged my children to question the scriptures. And my own questions proliferated. Then, one evening during our usual bedtime ritual, I turned to the next selection in their Children's Story Bible (an inferior, generally bland volume compared to the version from my childhood). But this story shocked me, and I could not remember having heard it before. How was that possible? "Jephthah's Daughter": as I read aloud about the young girl proceeding inexorably to her own sacrifice at the hands of her father, I kept thinking, *what do I say to the children about this?* I don't remember saying anything; I think I speedily segued into our evening

prayer. But Jephthah's daughter began haunting me, and her story would be the first biblical one I would write.

In graduate religious studies in the late 1980's, I discovered that, for some time, biblical scholars had been applying the insights of feminism and other contemporary critical outlooks to enrich their readings of the biblical texts. These new readings had yet to reach a wide audience, but they existed. I also accepted that I had little enthusiasm for pursuing biblical scholarship in a systematic way or for studying the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek necessary to conduct serious biblical exegesis. (In fact, it was the very act of writing my religious education thesis that helped me realize what I wanted to do instead: write fiction and study other kinds of literature.) During this time period, though, I also learned about the centuries-old rabbinic tradition of commentaries on the Hebrew Scriptures, the "stories about the stories" known as midrash.

Springing from a close reading of the text, typically offering more than one view, reflecting the life contexts of those who compose them, midrash interpretations elaborate upon the information offered in scripture to render it more meaningful. The term *midrash* refers both to the extensive rabbinic compilations that have already been written and to the ongoing process of responding to scripture this way. Among the observations offered in the *Genesis Rabbah* is the opinion that women must be superior to men because the Lord fashioned creatures in ascending order of importance, and Eve was created after Adam. Such an entry written hundreds of years ago by a male rabbi makes me smile, in part because it conflates the order of creation in the first chapter of Genesis with that in the second, but also because it suggests that while the Bible is undeniably a collection of culturally bound, frequently androcentric documents, the interpretive

streams that flow from these have not always disdained or dismissed women. All too often, however, these refreshing streams have been dammed up or diverted to run underground. While immersing myself in the research for this creative project, I have been delighted to discover previously unknown-to-me traditional readings of scripture that interpret women in positive ways, in addition to gaining a fuller awareness of the current feminist landscape of biblical scholarship and criticism. And the midrash method has strongly influenced my approach to reworking the biblical materials.

### Developing an Approach, Shaping the Boundaries

Having decided to devote myself to a substantial creative writing project, I did not need to ponder long what the subject would be. I wanted to fictively inhabit the lives suggested by those brief, third-person omniscient references to women in the Hebrew Bible. (Perhaps some day I would tackle the New Testament as well, but the Hebrew Bible included more than enough subjects to inspire one collection.) Stepping into a long tradition of biblically-inspired fiction, I determined certain parameters for my work. I would focus on women who had not been treated kindly by the mainstream tradition—or obscure figures who had hardly been treated at all. Letting these women have their own voices seemed an important symbolic gesture, so I decided to write each story in first person. A character represented as narrating her own story demonstrates agency and places an immediate claim on the reader's sympathy, yet the first-person point of view is necessarily limited—also a significant characteristic for my purposes. Acknowledging the story-teller's inherent limitation worked as an intentional counter to the biblical writers' omniscient presentation.

Initially, I planned to write each narrative in present tense to heighten the immediacy of the plot and the narrator's voice. Nominally, I followed that plan, though the present tense sections in "Household Gods" serve only as a frame for its past-tense midsection. Realizing the necessity of extending Leah's story, I decided that having Leah as a middle-aged woman looking back with some perspective on her life might suggest more compelling possibilities for her voice.

After writing the three shorter fiction pieces, but before beginning the novella, I decided to include poetry in this collection as well. The basis for my decision was two-fold. One: I originally wrote a different ending for "Like Spices for the Dead." It presented Hagar speaking from the dead, looking back with regret on 3000+ years of Arab-Israeli strife. Not quite successful, that section did contain one line I could not bear to kill (Faulkner's advice notwithstanding): "I sleep beneath a dew-mound in Paran." It seemed to have written itself—politely, in iambic pentameter—and *needed* to be part of a poem. Two: once I reflected on it, the idea of a multi-genre collection seemed the "right" format for a work written in response to the multiform Hebrew Bible. Only recently have I come across a notation by scholars Cyrus Gordon and Gary Rendsburg about the pervasiveness of mixed genre forms in ancient Near Eastern literature. Even Hammurapi's Code, they observe, is a mixed genre work, with a poetry prologue and epilogue, the prose laws in between (78-79).

While part of the scheme for my work involves critiquing the Bible stories—and especially their dominant interpretations—I realize that I am also paying tribute to this complex document that has exerted such influence in my life, in literature and history. I decided—in the midrash tradition—to add incidents at will but not to alter the biblical

material except where inconsistencies made changes necessary for a coherent narrative. (Like other folklore, sometimes the Bible presents incompatible versions of an event; more often than not, the numbers reported in the Bible have symbolic, not factual, value; facticity itself is a concern unfamiliar to these ancient writers.)

Another guideline I set for myself: to construct story-worlds that would reflect as accurately as possible the historical, environmental, and social conditions in which the various legendary or fictional characters would have found themselves. Trying to observe this stricture was not a straightforward task because of the lack of scholarly consensus on so many background issues of the Biblical stories. Archeological discoveries of the past few decades are still being analyzed, interpreted, and argued about, and as a non-scholar in the field, I am left with little recourse but to pick and choose versions of the past that will serve my stories. I hope to offer historical believability when I cannot promise accuracy.

As part of that striving after believability, I have tried, particularly in the fiction, to present these women characters—so distant from modern readers in time and culture—as having psyches sufficiently strange to register their otherness. I do, however, recognize my incapacity to comprehend how their perceptions would have actually been organized. Thus, I have merely tried not to jar the reader by planting *too* obvious a modern consciousness in women who would have lived three to four thousand years ago. In some respects, this characterization limitation may be a happy fault because reader sympathy depends upon a certain level of connection with the character presented.

I hope that these ancient women and their struggles *will* appeal to readers, even readers who are unfamiliar with the Bible. Having grown intimately acquainted with

their representations through reading scripture and folklore collections and commentary, I face the recurring risk of assuming that a general reader will know more about them than I should expect. Especially in the poetry, finding the balance between meaningful allusion and impenetrable obscurity posed an ongoing concern. The problems of writing about Biblical women resemble the quandaries of writing memoir or creative non-fiction. In varying degrees, the outlines of these women's lives—or stories—are already given. What I do when writing about them is select a moment here, focus on a detail there, elaborate on the outlines, impose—or find—meaning.

Perhaps the greatest challenge in writing this biblical fiction has involved issues I did not fully appreciate when I embarked on this project: sustaining the diction level and producing syntactic patterns to evoke “echoes of the ancient.” I have tried to infuse the fiction, and some of the poetry, with parallelisms (the characteristic feature of pre-Greek poetry) and produce metaphoric language rooted in the ancient world. In the pursuit of such language I have raided the Hebrew Bible, Egyptian and Jewish folktales, and translations of ancient Sumerian verse for felicitous words and phrases. Often I have felt as though I were translating modern English into “ancient-ese.” I should have kept a list of all the words I tried to use and had to change because they were derived from the names of items or activities that would have been unknown to people living in Egypt or the Near East several thousand years ago. Yet all the while, I realize that this diction issue is both a deeply subjective and ironic concern. I am employing artifice to produce language that will be perceived as *not* artificial, but authentic.

Planted in the Garden—or a Little to the East

As I mentioned earlier, this collection takes its place in a long tradition of biblically inspired fiction and poetry. I have surveyed many such works but can certainly *not* claim acquaintance with even a majority of those in the English language. Nevertheless, based on my sampling of narratives that retell portions of the Hebrew Bible using the ancient settings, I will venture the following: Until recent years, such works have been marked by their pious perspective and/or predominantly been written by males. From a woman's (this woman's) vantage point, the limitations of the male writers are their tendencies to focus on the male characters in the stories and/or to present the dominant, familiar interpretations. Thus, we have Milton forging lasting art, but offering a devastating portrait of Eve. Coleridge presents a startling view of Cain in his unfinished "Wanderings of Cain," but no women in sight. Byron and Blake provide unorthodox characterizations in *Cain* and "The Ghost of Abel," but women characters remain on the periphery in both cases. Even such a fine contemporary writer as Frederick Buechner, whose 1993 *The Son of Laughter* presents insightful characterizations of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, gives his women characters short shrift. Leah remains close to a caricature. I suppose it is reasonable for these men to focus on male subjects, but women remain on the margins, waiting to hear their stories.

With much greater frequency than fiction writers, both men and women poets have drawn from the biblical materials to compose short works. And these poems demonstrate satisfyingly diverse perspectives. How to account for the relative abundance of such poems? Based on my own experience of writing biblical poetry *and* fiction, I can propose the following: the poem permits its writer a brief, however heightened,

excursion into scripture's territory without demanding that the writer live there, plow forty acres, and learn every inch of the terrain.

Those women committed to homesteading, who seek to write literary fiction that revisits the bible in its ancient contexts, must be a small group. David Lyle Jeffery's 1992 *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* lists none. More recently, however, Anita Diamant's adamantly feminist *The Red Tent* (1997), which uses the character Dinah as its narrator, has become a best-seller.

If I were to announce an "agenda" for my own work, I suppose *balanced* would be my descriptor of choice. The biblical tradition is skewed. If anyone needs statistical confirmation of that, Karla Bohmach reports that the Hebrew Bible contains 1,426 names, of which a mere 111 belong to women (34). Nevertheless, this skewed biblical tradition is irrevocably mine and one to which I am deeply attached. Spotlighting a few of the liminal women characters of the Hebrew Bible will—I hope—heighten in some small degree the visibility of women within the tradition and spark interest in seeing the whole tradition more clearly. To that end, I have tried to develop characters of both genders who seem complicated and human.

Perhaps now is the time to emphasize that, while this project is informed by scripture, commentaries, folklore collections, translations of ancient poetry, criticism, research into ancient religions and landscapes and civilizations, it is first and foremost an exercise in storytelling and poetry, in verbal art. I hope that meaning can be found here, but I will have failed in my enterprise if the reader, somewhere within these pages, does not also experience beauty.

### Creation Stories

Listed below are the pertinent scriptural references for the characters presented in these stories and poems, with incidental notes.

EVE (Genesis 2:4-4:16): The biblical material about Adam and Eve is mythic, not rooted in the historical world. Thus, I used some freedom in representing a setting for “As It Was in the Beginning” and decided to make the story short and myth-like as well. Interpreting the Genesis story as descriptive rather than prescriptive of relations between men and women, I aimed for a recognizable Eve (and Adam), who could easily slip into the modern world. I intend “As It Was,” “Eve, Reflective,” and “Eve in Old Age, after Adam” to represent three mythic views of Eve, not a coherent “Eve.”

NAAMAH (Genesis 4:8-24): “Naamah and her Brothers” owes its existence to an entry by Carol Meyers in *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/ Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*. A Genesis genealogical list that is apparently unaware of Noah and the Flood lists Naamah along with her brothers, and the three brothers are cited as the founders of vocations, but only Naamah’s name is given. Meyers points out, however, that the Hebrew root of Naamah, n’m, can mean either “to be pleasant, lovely” or “to sing.” All of the brothers’ names signify their vocations, and Meyers speculates that Hebrew audiences would have understood Naamah as the archetypal founder of vocal music.

NOAH’S WIFE and ELDEST DAUGHTER-IN-LAW (Genesis 5:28-10:32): I read a cycle of biblical poems by Lucille Clifton in her *Good Woman: poems and a memoir* and admired their clean beauty, their profound spareness. Using her work as a model, I pondered what subject(s) I might approach with similar economy and realized I

would need to choose women who were part of a familiar story. Such poetry functioned as a culminating moment that would only make sense if the reader knew the rest of the story. Noah's unnamed wife seemed a particularly apt choice; medieval drama depicts her as a shrew and worse. It seemed time for another representation.

I read "Noah's Wife, When the Forty-Day Downpour Has Ceased" to my oldest son, and he said it sounded "pretty dark," so I tried to write a more hopeful poem. Thinking that the younger generation of Ark passengers might be the place to turn, I immediately thought of Noah's daughters-in-law. Surely the unnamed wife of Noah's eldest son, Shem, the putative father of the Semites, would have a more positive perspective on her situation than her mother-in-law. "Noah's Eldest Daughter-in-law Disembarks" grew slightly larger than I had intended; whether it offers a positive outlook, I leave to readers.

HAGAR (Genesis 12; 15-18; 21-22; 25:1-18): Though acknowledged in more modern times as a model for oppressed women who persevere, Hagar as a woman directly addressed by the Deity impresses the rabbis writing midrash. To account for her remarkable epiphany, they suggest that she must have been an Egyptian princess. (Islamic tradition remembers Hagar as a princess, too, but not her casting out by Abraham. Instead, when trouble develops between Sarah and Hagar, Abraham prudently moves Hagar and her child out into the desert, where he visits them on a regular basis. According to the Qur'an, Abraham and Ishmael build the Ka'ba together.) I had originally hoped to include Islamic folk sources in composing "Like Spices for the Dead," but the traditions were too disparate.

Genesis gives an account of Isaac and Ishmael burying Abraham, but does not mention Hagar's death, much less her burial. "Hagar Speaks of Stones" rectifies the oversight. Having seen a photograph of a treeless field in Israel dotted with dew-mounds, laundry-basket sized piles of stones, I knew that I had to do something with the image. Burying the dead beneath trees was a common practice.

LEAH, RACHEL, ZILPAH, BILHAH (Genesis 23:17-20; 24; 25:19-34; 27-35):  
I named my daughter "Rachel" because, when I was twenty-one and she was born, I could think of no blessing for her greater than that of being loved as deeply as the biblical Rachel had been loved. As the years passed, I gained appreciation for the unloved Leah. Hers was the story I set out to tell. My first efforts at writing "Household Gods" started with the moment Laban catches up to Jacob and the household, who have fled Paddan-aram and are on their way back to Canaan. The amount of backstory needed to make sense of their situation proved too great, though, so I started over and wrote a novella instead of a story. While Genesis does not refer to Zilpah and Bilhah as daughters of Laban, this detail from *Legends of the Jews* seemed too interesting not to incorporate.

I am indebted to Thorkild Jacobsen's translations of ancient Sumerian verse for much of the language of "Bilhah, Jacob's Concubine." The kishkanu tree was used in magic healing rituals, and Eridu was the sacred city where such trees grew. (I thought their sounds were magical.)

Numerous commentaries suggest that the name *Zilpah* is derived from the Arabic for "short-nosed." Given the ancients' understanding of the nose as the actual organ of breath (as opposed to the lungs, which they knew nothing about) and considering the symbolic equivalence of "breath" and "life" resulted in "Zilpah, Who Bore Jacob Two

Sons for Her Mistress, Leah.” *Manakhir kebira* means “large noses” in modern Arabic (and sounds significantly more poetic than the English phrase).

“Rachel in Sheol, Lamented and Lamenting” alludes to Rachel’s traditional remembrance as a mother grieving for her children. Its final stanza was influenced by a lament for the god Damu, translated by Thorkild Jacobsen.

While scripture does not relate the event of Leah’s death, it does mention that Jacob buried her next to his mother and father, thus, “Leah at Last.”

SHIPHRAH, PUAH (Exodus 1-2): Mayer Gruber notes in *Women in Scripture* that “the crucial role of the midwives in subverting Pharaoh’s decree is, perhaps, reflected in the Talmudic attribution of the redemption from Egypt to the merit of the virtuous women of that generation” (138). “Shiphrah and Puah: Midwives in Egypt” celebrates these women.

RAHAB (Joshua 2, 6): “Rahab’s Apology” opens with an allusion to the folktale “Rapunzel”—another young woman held in another kind of captivity—who eventually gains her freedom by “letting down her long hair.”

JEPHTHAH’S DAUGHTER (Judges 11, 12): This story’s contemporary obscurity appears to be just that—contemporary. Jeffrey reports its historical popularity in prose, poetry, and drama from John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* to Hartley Coleridge’s “On a Picture of Jephthah and His Daughter” (1851).

I first wrote a much shorter version of “Jephthah’s Daughter” that was told from the daughter’s point of view and focused on her reflections on the meaning of her death. Elie Wiesel’s essay “Jephthah’s Daughter” made me aware of the confrontation between Jephthah and his daughter related in the Talmud, as well as its introduction (and

condemnation) of Pinhas the High Priest. Becoming more and more interested in the roles of the friends who were asked to stay with the doomed daughter through that last long month, I decided to let one of the daughter's friends be her champion and confront both Jephthah and the High Priest.

I am also indebted to Wiesel's essay for his reflections on the character of Jephthah, which suggested to me a connection between the daughter's sacrifice and the "Shibboleth" slaughter that I explore in "Judge Jephthah's Daughter Confesses."

HANNAH (1 Samuel 1, 2:1-11): "Hannah Wises Up" reconsiders this model of the selfless mother who gives up her son for God.

VASHTI (Esther 1, 2): "The Song of Vashti" is the first poem I wrote for the collection that was not related to one of the fiction pieces. Wanting to tell the Persian queen's story, I was struck by how ballad-like the elements of it seemed: the pair of royal characters, the woman ill-treated by a man. So I decided to try a narrative poem employing a ballad-like stanza that would use some form of incremental repetition, but not rhyme—in keeping with the ancients' focus on parallelism. I wrote the first stanza. It appeared on the page in five lines, and I decided to keep writing.

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## EVE, REFLECTIVE

In those days  
I was content  
to stroll by his side  
through the garden—leaves,  
fronds, ferns, grasses  
muted and cool or singing  
with sunlight. We nibbled  
breadfruit, mangos, juicy  
red plums, and I never dreamed  
of craving other sustenance  
or learning too much to be satisfied  
by a world that encompassed  
only him.

## AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING

Flamingo-colored clouds settle at the edge of the western sky and a pale moon shimmers, but I don't think he sees them. As we sit by the fire on an uprooted pine, sopping up the dregs of our barley soup with wedges of flat bread, he stares into the flames. "In the beginning," he says, "everything was so simple. Just the two of us, remember?"

And I do remember how it was when I first loved him and he was my whole world. "There's more bread," I say.

A sudden breeze plucks the tent cords, whispers through brush and branch that the days of rain are coming. Our fire sputters, but on such a mild evening, neither of us bothers to tend it. After setting his bowl to one side, he slowly massages my nape, strokes my shoulder, touches the curve of my breast. My back tenses, and he asks "What's the matter?" as he catches my hand and spreads it against the top of his thigh.

I glance around the clearing, stretch to peer beyond the side of our tent. "The boys, Adam." Though I see neither of them, his fondling makes me uneasy. I squeeze his thigh and lean briefly against his side, hoping to soften my rejection. "Good soup," I say. "Thanks for the saffron flowers. I know they weren't easy to find."

"Don't worry about the boys," he cajoles, one finger tracing the length of my arm. "Abel has those ewes ready to lamb. He's been spending every spare minute at the sheepfold—"

"I know." I lower my voice. "But what about Cain?"

“Didn’t he go with him?” Adam lets me go, grips his knees, levers himself up. Ashe turns, he stares past our camp into the trees. “Cain!” he calls. “Cain!”

Barefoot, tunic unbelted, our older son stumbles from the tent. Already, he is as tall as his father, but with narrow back and shoulders—more like mine.

“Well?” demands Adam. “Why aren’t you helping your brother?”

Cain’s face tightens, but his gaze rises no higher than his father’s knees. “I was tired,” he mumbles. His long thick curls dangle over his eyes. For the first time, I notice the sparse prickles bearding his chin and wonder when they sprouted.

“We sleep at night.” Adam enunciates each word with exaggerated precision. “It’s barely dusk.” He stalks two steps forward, stops an arm’s length in front of Cain. “Did you finish clearing the stones from the field today like I told you?”

Sick with the knowledge of what I have precipitated, I force myself to stand.

And sure enough, Cain admits he did not finish. “The field is thick with rocks. I worked all day—look.” He extends reddened, blistered palms, skin split open along the fingers. “Can’t I finish in the morning?”

Adam ignores the hands, barely raises his voice. “Are you lazy *and* forgetful? I told you I mean to plow at first light. Go on now,” Adam sweeps the air with the back of his hand, “get out there and do what I told you to do.”

I have learned not to interfere, but the inside of my chest aches like a pinched bruise. As Adam turns away, I hastily unknot the woolen sash from my waist and offer it to our son. “Here.” I mouth the words. “Bind your hands.”

#

Beside me, Adam lies spent. And then that one foot starts to twitch. I don't have it in me to sing to him tonight, so, propped up on one elbow, I let my fingers follow along the line of his beard, caress his wet-warm chest and shoulders to calm him. As the lines in his face smooth, I see again the young man I adored and try to forgive myself for the pleasure he still gives me.

When did his heart harden toward the boys? In the beginning, they delighted him as much as they did me: their tiny, helpless bodies, soft as lilies; the way they smiled back at us; those funny babbling sounds that turned to words. He seems to have forgotten all of that. And what it took to bring them into the world. Perhaps if his body had spent hours wracked with birth pangs, he'd remember.

Adam turns over so I can rub his back and thread my fingers through his thinning hair. Especially, he likes me to trace light circles behind his ears. From the other side of sleep, he nestles his head to my hand and murmurs my name.

The night cools. I draw my cloak back around my shoulders and reach for the blankets bunched at our feet to cover us. Off to the north hyenas cry, and I imagine Cain in darkness, out in the rocky field, clearing away stones with painful, ruined hands.

I should go to him. When Adam has stopped stirring, when his breathing deepens, I'll find Cain and help him clear the stones from the field. I'll tell him that his father doesn't mean to be cruel. That I'm sorry.

For an anxious time I wait, my eyes wide to keep them from sleep. The odors of our lovemaking seep away, and my thighs have almost dried. Finally, I lift the blanket ever so slightly and start to roll toward the edge of the pallet.

“Eve?” Adam flings out an arm, happens to catch my shoulder, mumbles, “Where’re you going?” Still half asleep, he shifts his body against mine and nuzzles until he finds and kisses my ear. In the dark, he can’t see my face, and when I say nothing, he pulls me to him.

Afterwards, my limbs are heavy. Tired eyes close. Faintly, I hear a nightjar’s call repeat and repeat and repeat. I think of Cain, the field, what I must do. Too soon, too soon, I fall asleep.

## EVE, IN OLD AGE, AFTER ADAM

In the beginning, we knew little  
but delight  
in the bright newness of being  
in the world and being together,  
exploring the green limits  
of love. And it was good  
to lie entwined  
in morning glory. Even now  
I can summon the taste  
of him—fruits and earth and palm.  
Soon enough, we'd learn  
of youth's brief span,  
death's heavy door  
creaked wide.  
And yet  
on balmy evenings  
the yearning heart remembers  
what it chooses—  
not the serpent, tree (or star?)  
that led us from the garden  
forever. Memory summons  
the taste  
of palms and earth and fruit.

## NAAMAH AND HER BROTHERS

We are the seventh generation  
scattered deep into the world  
since our first parents tilled soil,  
sweated, and cried out  
giving life to dust.

Rooted now, we send forth shoots  
into the limbs, minds, dreams  
of those who fall from us,  
eager to tear their lives  
from tainted ground.

We are children of woe,  
but do not despise us.  
Who chooses the blighted  
or blooming branch  
where they will ripen?

Our forefather Cain  
slew his brother with a stone;  
with the sword our father, Lamech,  
began a blood-feud,  
but we have forged other paths:

Jabal, the oldest, the father  
of tent-dwellers,  
sheep-tenders, cattle-herders,  
who search for green pastures.

Jubal, musician,  
the father of pipe-players,  
lyre-strummers, sistrum-shakers  
who gladden the heart.

Tubalcain, tool-maker,  
father of crafters  
who work iron and bronze,  
who shape thought to ease toil.

And I, Naamah, the mother of singers,  
who, crooning lullabies, can lift  
the tired and troubled from the pit  
and, empty-handed,  
slay sorrows.

NOAH'S WIFE,  
WHEN THE FORTY-DAY DOWNPOUR HAS CEASED

Rain.  
I have grown  
sick of it.  
My spirit sops.  
No sun,  
no rainbow,  
no promise  
from God on high  
can dry  
my tears,  
light my way,  
make me forget  
Rain.

## NOAH'S ELDEST DAUGHTER-IN-LAW DISEMBARKS

I cannot afford  
to look back.  
Everything is washed  
away: home, belongings,  
neighbors, friends, strangers  
in the marketplace—quenched  
and gone. So we stagger on,  
Shem and I, barefoot, chosen,  
blessing pressing us  
into wet clay.  
A pair of ravens  
and a pair of doves  
sail out into the morning.

## LIKE SPICES FOR THE DEAD

I face him on this sand-carved ridge—beyond the tents, beyond the wells, beyond the sheepfold. The morning sun still swims behind the scrubby brown hills east of our encampment, but I see my master clearly. The fullness of his mantle hides the gaunt, aged body, yet I know well that bony frame and leathered skin—though it has been four years since I lay beneath him. Since I conceived our son.

A few paces away, Ishmael climbs on the uprooted palm tree that marks the western boundary of our settlement—beyond which the children may not wander—while I wait to hear why Abraham has summoned us here, so far from the tents. Across the rocky fields rise the mournful bleats of sheep, the muffled squalls of babies, the bustle of the day's beginning. I should be with Zillah and Milcah now, preparing to bake the day's bread.

But the moments ripen and swell, and still Abraham watches Ishmael without speaking. My uneasiness grows until it threatens to choke the breath from my throat. Abraham is not like other men—he has not mellowed with age, nor bent with the weight of his five-score years.

At last he turns to me. "Hagar," he says, "you must go. You and the boy. Today."

My stomach lurches. What does he mean? "My lord, go where?" I try to keep the edge from my voice. "We are surrounded by wilderness." I swing one arm at the desolate horizon, at the wasteland of rock and desert scrub.

Abraham turns the palms of his hands toward me. "You must take Ishmael from my tents, Hagar. This is the word of my mouth."

Out of habit, I bow my head in submission to his command. I stare at the cracked ground, at a single tussock of dry grass. My mistress Sarah must be behind this. For more than two years—since she gave birth to her own son—she has harried me at every turn. The woman has the honor of a yellow scorpion. When I delivered Ishmael into her lap, she accepted him as her own, but her doting ended the day her own shriveled womb conceived. And now she has convinced Abraham to turn us out. Yet how can he do it? Ishmael is his first-born son.

With a whoop, Ishmael jumps down from the palm trunk and skips over to stand between his father and me. Holding his arms out for balance, Ishmael hops three times on one foot, then three times on the other. He is showing off for his father. How can Abraham not be moved?

But he is already explaining that God has counseled him to send us away, and if Abraham thinks God has told him to do something, he will do it. "God assures me. He will make a great nation of Ishmael." Abraham lays one hand on our son's head as if to bless him. I feel like vomiting. At least Ishmael is too young to understand.

"We will not survive in the wilderness." I speak urgently, not loudly. I don't want to frighten Ishmael. But the child only knows his father is paying him attention. He reaches up and catches his father's hand.

After a moment, Abraham leans over and, smiling, squeezes Ishmael's hand between both of his. He counts out "One, Two, Three," then tosses the hand up as if

releasing a captured bird. From the sleeve of his mantle he pulls a woolen sack. "Barley bread," he says and hands the sack to me. "Hagar, God will take care of you."

I can only think how little God has to do with this. "Please," I say, "if Sarah is angry with me, I will beg her forgiveness. Let me try harder to satisfy her—I'm sure I can do it."

Abraham shakes his head.

I clutch the bread sack with both hands. "Is this because of the boys' scuffle yesterday? You must know Ishmael was only playing. He loves little Isaac, he would never hurt him on purpose."

"I know that," says Abraham. He lifts the waterskin slung across his shoulder and places its cord over my head. I thread one arm under the cord, so the heavy skin of water hangs at my side. With clumsy fingers I secure the bread sack inside the sleeve of my cloak.

Abraham picks Ishmael up, though he grunts with the effort. The boy laughs with delight and pokes and fingers his father's curly white beard. Abraham bounces him a little. "Ishmael is a fine boy," he says. "I am proud of him."

"Then how can you send us away?"

"Hagar, it is God's will." Abraham says the words with sonorous conviction, as if they settle everything. I stare at him, at the pitted, eagle-beak nose, the sagging cheeks and rotten teeth and decide that he is so old he has lost his mind.

Abraham speaks to Ishmael now. "Guess what? You are going on a journey with your mother—a great adventure—what about that?"

"Yes, yes!" cries Ishmael, and he turns, still in his father's embrace, and stretches out his arms toward me.

Abraham lifts our son onto my back. His arms reach around my neck, and I shift his weight into the most comfortable position. Turning from Abraham, I gaze westward across the dusty Wilderness of Beer-sheba. So this is why he summoned us here—west is the way Ishmael and I must go, though it is the sixth month and the middle of the dry season. At least the ground in that direction will be mostly flat. The Way to Shur, the trail of the caravans, lies out there somewhere. Somewhere.

Ishmael's sandals dig into me, so I pull up the sides of my cloak to bind them and tuck the ends through my belt. This small distraction steadies me. There *was* that other time, before Ishmael was born, when I had run away from Sarah's beatings and the Lord's messenger met me on the Way to Shur. We were camped to the north then, halfway to Gerar. But perhaps El Shaddai, the God of Vision, will lead me again to the spring of Beer-lahai-roi. If not, and Ishmael and I must die, at least we will die closer to Egypt, closer to home.

"Hagar," says Abraham. He ruffles Ishmael's hair for the last time. If he so much as touches me in farewell, I will scream at him, I don't care if I *am* a slave. "Hagar, I am giving you your freedom."

Well. Am I supposed to shout for joy? I start walking.

"Depart in peace, Hagar," the old fool calls after us. "The Lord bless you and keep you, Ishmael."

Tears start to form in my eyes, but I know each drop of water is too precious to waste.

"Good-bye, Papa," Ishmael calls. "Mama, aren't you going to say good-bye to Papa?"

"Some things don't need to be said, Ishmael." My voice sounds harsh, and Ishmael falls silent. For a time, anger keeps my steps firm, my pace swift. I hardly notice Ishmael's weight. God will take care of us, indeed. The old goat. He's pleased to let the Mighty One take care of things when it suits him. Did he think God could take care of giving him a son by his shriveled old shrew of a wife? Oh, no. The Lord of All needed some help then. I stop, draw in my breath, and scream it all out at the sky.

"Aiieee."

Ishmael stiffens. "What is it, Mama? What's the matter?"

I'm glad he can't see my face. "I think something bit my foot, Ishmael." I stick out one foot and inspect it. "I can't see anything—it feels better now. Don't worry." I pat his arm and lean my head to kiss the inside of his elbow at my shoulder. He smells like damp flax in the sun, like baby. "Here we go." I bounce Ishmael along for the next few steps, and he squeals with glee.

After a while, he starts to chatter. "Mama, are we going to see trees on our journey?"

"I don't know."

"Why couldn't Isaac come with us?"

"He has to stay with his mother."

"Is he as big as I am now?"

"No, Ishmael, you are still the big brother. The feast we had yesterday for Isaac means he's not a baby anymore, but you will always be older than he is." You just won't receive your birthright because that she-serpent Sarah has poisoned your father.

"I'm thirsty, Mama."

I sigh and stop. "Two swallows, Ishmael. This water has to last us a long time."

Ra sails the sun higher and the day's heat swells as I step carefully now among the loose pebbles and rocks that cover the ground. What would we do if I turned an ankle? But I hate that our going is so slow. Scattered tufts of brown grass and occasional thornbushes are all that rise from the stony dirt until I spot dark shapes in the distance that must be pillars of rock.

When Ishmael complains again of thirst, I tell him we'll stop when our shadow reaches the big rocks up ahead. Gouging me with his knees, he rears up over my shoulder to watch our fat shadow with two heads float across the ground. "Look," he says, as he sticks one arm out sideways and jiggles it.

"How about that?" I say, and before long we come to a cluster of reddish standing rocks, two of them twice as high as a meeting tent, all of them wind-shaved as bare as an Egyptian chin.

When I set Ishmael down, I'm surprised at how sharply my back and arms ache. In the shade of the biggest rock, shaped like a giant ostrich egg, I spread my cloak.

Ishmael says he's hungry; can we have a feast like the one for Isaac yesterday?

I hand him a chunk of dry bread and tell him today we can have a pretend feast, just the two of us, won't *that* be fun? He can imagine he's eating anything at all: figs and raisins or lamb or sesame cakes—

"With honey?" he asks.

"With anything," I say. I want to save most of the bread for Ishmael, but I break off a small piece for myself. "Eat slowly now. Everyone eats slowly at a feast while they talk and share stories."

"Talk a story, Mama," Ishmael begs, with his mouth full.

"All right," I say. Maybe that will keep my mind off how hungry I am. I sit cross-legged, rest my hands on my knees, then bend forward to catch Ishmael's eye.

"There is a land of wonders to the west, little Ishmael, where the River flows and there are many trees and always good things to eat. The king of this land is called Pharaoh, and he doesn't live in a tent. He lives in a grand house made of white bricks, and has many, many servants and beautiful treasures."

"What kind of treasures?"

"Marvelous treasures, Ishmael: cups of silver, plates of gold, amulets and bracelets with topaz and rubies; the most wonderful things you can imagine."

"I'm imagining," says Ishmael.

"That's right," I say. "And so, a pharaoh has a very pleasant life, not only because of his beautiful treasures but also because his rule brings ma'at to all the people."

"Mama, what is ma'at?"

I reach over and touch Ishmael's plump bronze cheek. What a smart boy; his mind is swift as a desert lark.

"Ma'at is the right order of things, Ishmael, the way they are meant to be. For you to get bigger and stronger as you grow up is ma'at. Being kind to strangers is also ma'at. Understand?"

I can tell by the way he rubs his eyes that he doesn't really know what I mean, so I just go on with my story.

"A pharaoh *should* be happy, but the one in my story wasn't, because some new people had come into his kingdom who were fierce and warlike. Trouble spread throughout the countryside, and the pharaoh felt afraid. He was afraid he might not be pharaoh much longer, but his biggest fear was for his only daughter and what would become of her if he should be killed."

"Didn't the pharaoh have a son?" asks Ishmael.

"No, only a daughter who wore clothes of the finest white linen and golden earrings and armlets and jeweled circlets in her thick black hair. She also had a small, soft, furry animal for a pet . . . a cat named Neftet that followed her everywhere and was her greatest delight.

"One day a wealthy man of Canaan, a herder of sheep and oxen, came to Pharaoh's house. He had come to Egypt to escape a famine in his own land. A famine is an extra long time of dryness, Ishmael, when all the plants die, and animals and people go hungry.

"Soon Pharaoh heard lots of people praising the goodness of this man from Canaan. Everyone said he was the favored one of a mighty god. The man said that was true, and the god he worshipped was El Shaddai, God of gods, mighty over all the earth.

"But all the while, trouble continued in Egypt and Pharaoh continued to worry. And so it happened that when the time came for the man from Canaan to return to his country, Pharaoh summoned him and said, 'Ma'at has gone from Egypt, and evil devours my days. You are a righteous man, favored by a mighty god. Take, then, my daughter

with you when you return to Canaan. It is better for her to be a slave in the household of a just man, than princess in a house of ruin.”

My voice starts to waver, and I fall silent. I'm not sure I can finish this story, but Ishmael prods me. "And then what, Mama? Then what?"

"The princess cried, but she did as she was told. She put away her fine clothes and golden ornaments and said good-bye to her father and Neftet the cat. Then she entered the household of Abraham the Canaanite and left the land of her birth—perhaps forever."

When I mention his father's name, Ishmael gasps and puts his hand over his mouth.

"And," I say, "some years later the girl who was once a princess gave birth to a handsome baby boy named Ishmael."

He raises his hands over his head. "That's me!" he shrieks.

"You're right," I say. I can't help smiling. "Don't ever forget, Ishmael, that you are the grandson of a pharaoh."

Ishmael squints and his whole face creases. "Were you really a princess, Mama?"

I sigh. "A long time ago, Ishmael, a long time ago." My eyes close. Now I am *Hagar*, another word for stone. It is the name I chose for myself in this land of dry dust and black tents. A hard name for a hard life.

I don't tell Ishmael that the Egyptian princess of long ago had another name, a musical name. Before the times of trouble, before her mother went down to the dead, the little princess would hear her calling in the cool gardens of the palace, by the pools of shimmering fish and lotus blossoms, "Mutemuia, Mutemuia."

"Ishmael, Ishmael," I say, and stretch out my arms and legs. "Let's try to rest now, till the heat of the day is past. What do you say?"

Ra is high over us. I move my cloak and settle Ishmael where the shade will increase as Ra sails down the sky. With his eyes closed, Ishmael is still mumbling about not being sleepy when I curl up beside him and drift off.

My ears waken before I do. Skrit, skrit, skrit. My eyes open, and barely a cubit from my face, a gray lizard the size of a sickle blade is twitching his spiny tail. I start up and his tail thrashes furiously for a moment, then he skitters off between the rocks.

As I slump in relief I feel sore all over. Beside me Ishmael still sleeps, his cheek on my cloak, his legs tucked under him, his little bottom sticking up in the air. What a position—but I guess it's comfortable for him. Every now and then his lips move like they're sucking, something he still does in his sleep, though he's been weaned for a year.

It's still hot, but the shadows are starting to lengthen, and Ishmael and I should move on. Yet I know he'll be fretful if I wake him. Was there ever a time when I slept so—deeply, oblivious to noises, certain that whatever the disturbance, I had no part in its remedy?

I lie back down, knees bent, on my corner of the cloak and stare at the cloudless sky. If El Shaddai rules over all the earth, is he watching us now? Was it a dream I had by the spring of Beer-lahai-roi the day I ran away from Sarah? Or did I truly see God and live?

I had thought I was alone that day when I collapsed beneath the tamarisk tree. No footstep sounded against the hard ground, no raven screeched a warning. But in the midst of my weeping I opened my eyes, and he was there. In a cloak gleaming whiter

than byssus. A smooth-faced stranger with ancient eyes whose voice rushed over me like wind. "Hagar" he called me. He knew my hard Canaanite name. And he promised me a son. I spread my hands on top of my belly and remember—*You shall call him "Ishmael," for the Lord has heard you, Hagar, and I will make your descendants too numerous to count.*

Who would believe that such a thing had happened? God making promises to a woman. I told no one. But when I gave birth to a son, I asked Abraham to call the child "Ishmael," and he agreed.

Now, as I watch Ishmael sleeping, I think about the second part of the stranger's prophecy, which I had almost forgotten, had tried to forget, but the obscure words suddenly make terrible sense. *He will be a wild ass of a man, his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him. In opposition to all his kin shall he encamp.*

My stomach churns as if I've eaten spoiled curds. God of gods. Is that why we were turned out? His father's hand against him, scorning ma'at, to set this prophecy in motion? My innocent Ishmael sent away to grow up angry and wild. What kind of promise is that to a small boy? "Answer me!" I shout at the sky.

Ishmael moans and wakes. "Mama?"

The afternoon breezes from the west barely cut the heat's intensity as we press on across rougher, sloping ground. Because of blowing sand, I keep my head down and my eyes closed to slits. Ishmael speaks into my hair, but every time I open my mouth to answer one of his questions—how do some rocks get so big? do clouds only live in the sky? how long do we have to keep walking?—I swallow grit.

We keep on for a while after the sun sinks, but when the pink and orange at the edge of the sky fade, I know we must find a place to stop. In the distance a jackal screams, and I search more urgently for shelter. With the tribe we would travel by night with torches of thorn to escape the heat of day, but alone Ishmael and I dare not venture on in the darkness. Even if I could see well enough to find our way, the two of us would be walking bait for beasts and demons.

Finally, at the base of a hill, between a pair of roundish boulders as high as a man, I set Ishmael down. This will have to do. I have him help me clear the stones off a space large enough for us to lie down.

"We're not going to sleep in a tent?" he asks.

"Oh, no. Adventures always include sleeping out under the stars."

By the time we finish eating, half our bread is gone, and at least half the water. No matter how much Ishmael complains tomorrow, I'll have to be more careful.

To keep him warm in the night, I snuggle next to him and fold a corner of the cloak over his bare legs. That means I'm lying partly in the dirt, but I curl my legs up into my long tunic and try not to think about how miserable I am.

For a while I lie tensely, waiting to hear the wails of hyenas and jackals, the roar of lions. But the night is as silent as the Great Sphinx at Giza. If the demon Lulu is coming to ravish me in my sleep, he makes no sound.

It's not yet light when I waken with the sense that Ishmael is no longer beside me. He's sitting on a low rock a couple of paces away, trying to fasten his sandals by himself.

"Mama," he says, "I don't like our adventure. I want to go home now."

"Oh, Ishmael," I say, as I wince with the pain of sitting up. "Let's have some bread and you'll feel better. Adventures can be hard sometimes."

"I don't want to eat just bread. I want fig cakes and milk. Let's go home."

His grumpy face tears my heart; I hate not being able to protect him from the truth. "Ishmael," I say quietly, "we can't go back to our old home. We're on our way to a new home now."

He looks at me as if I've lost my mind. "I don't want a new home. I want my old home, and I want Papa." He kicks one foot in my direction; the sandal flies off and grazes my arm.

With a groan I push myself up and go to kneel in front of him. I try to look into his eyes, but he turns his head sideways and won't face me. "Ishmael, we can't go back." I hold onto his upper arms for emphasis. "Your father loves you, but he is always determined to do whatever God wants. He says God told him to send us on this journey. If what your father heard was truly the voice of El Shaddai, then we will be all right." I put my arms around Ishmael and hug him hard, until he starts wriggling to be free.

Desperately, I want to believe my own words, but I wonder how our plight can be God's design. Why would the Lord of All torment a child? And yet, with my own ears I heard the stranger's crooked blessing. Did I really hear? Did Abraham? What I see is Ishmael, unwinding the bread sack.

After we eat, he agrees to try to walk for awhile, so we hold hands and set out. By mid-morning I have to carry him again, but we finally have some luck: We reach a wadi cut into the earth, perhaps fifteen cubits wide, and running roughly east to west.

Ishmael slides and I climb down into the empty watercourse. It's worn as smooth as a road and makes our going much easier. Perhaps El Shaddai guides our steps after all.

By nightfall I am back to doubting. I have no idea how far we've come or how many schoinoi it may yet be to the Way of Shur. Even if we reach it, what is the chance that a caravan will come along in time to save us?

I think these thoughts as I put away a single crust of bread for Ishmael to have in the morning. Another swallow for each of us from the waterskin, and it will be empty.

Curled next to Ishmael, I try to sing a lullaby, but my voice only rasps. Instead, I begin to pat his back slowly, gently, until at last he sleeps. There is so little I can do to comfort him. This afternoon as I carried him on my back he was quiet as the moon. Twice I felt his body quiver with crying, but he made not a whimper. The taste of helplessness fills my mouth, bitter, bitter, like spices for the dead.

I lie back, watching the sky. Sin, the lamp of heaven, sails his crescent barge among the stars. Some say the priests at Haran read omens in the stars, but I see only specks of light, very far away.

Long ago, when my beautiful mother died of the wasting sickness, I thought that was the worst that could happen. And then my father sent me away to be a slave. What could be worse than that? Reports from Akkadian traders that a new pharaoh ruled in Egypt. I could never go back. And then, Sarah telling me I must become her ancient husband's concubine. I felt like a woman turned to salt. Never would I be unveiled by a real husband, strong with life and wanting more from me than a son. Never would I have children to call my own. Such evil luck. Now that Ishmael is finally all mine, I don't think I can keep him alive.

I wake up to pangs of hunger and the stink of my own dried sweat.

"I don't feel good," whines Ishmael, holding his stomach.

"I'm sorry," I say, touching his cheek. I kneel before him to give him the last bit of bread. "You're being very brave, Ishmael. I'm proud that you're my son."

After Ishmael eats, we finish our water and set out. With Ishmael on my back, I follow the course of the wadi until I notice our shadow is keeping to one side. The wadi is winding south. The end of our luck.

Leaving the wadi behind, we head west again over low ground thick with pebbles and dotted with more shrubs than we've seen. By the limpness of Ishmael's body I can tell he's sleeping.

When Ra is high, I finally stretch my cloak over two gray briar bushes to give us cover. My head feels like it's being pounded by a shepherd's club. My arm shakes as I hastily clear the ground and lay Ishmael down. He curls up like a dry gourd, and I drop beside him and slip into blackness.

In mid-afternoon I am wakened by Ishmael's moans. Pain stabs through my skull as I push myself up. When I run my hands along Ishmael's hot face and arms, he feels dry. Death rears his jackal head and despair sears my bones.

I grab my cloak, wrap Ishmael in it, gather him against my breast and stumble on, though I know it is hopeless. Ma'at has gone from the earth. See how my father saved me from a house of ruin. I should have died with him in Egypt. I cry out. "Abraham, I curse you. May God tell you to kill your *other* son!"

Ishmael's limp body weighs heavy in my arms. I trip and almost fall, going down on one knee. "Papa, papa," Ishmael moans, and I can bear it no longer.

Holding him, I can barely keep my balance, but I manage to rise and stagger a few steps to the nearest shrub. As I lay him in its shade and bend to kiss him, I see his hands and feet begin to jerk.

I straighten and back away, then turn and retreat the distance of a bowshot. I sit, lean back against a boulder, and close my eyes. How can I watch my child die?

In his delirium Ishmael calls out. I clap my hands to my ears.

And then I hear it, though no one is there, the voice of the smooth-faced stranger: *What is the matter, Hagar? Fear not; God has heard the boy's cry. Arise, lift him up and hold him by the hand, for I will make of him a great nation.*

A sudden breeze stirs the few bushes and blows sand against my back. I scramble to my feet, turn around, and blink. My heart quickens at what I think I see. Next to the rock I have been leaning against is a pile of broken stones, half covered with sand, sprouting a spindly thornbush and a clump of gray-green grass.

With bare hands I yank up the thornbush and tear away the grass. My knuckles bleed. I kneel and brush off sand and bits of rock from the rough, flattened, central stone. A well-stone, dear God of gods. A well. I lay my cheek against the hard gray surface and grip it, but how will I ever lift it? Two men would struggle to uncover such a well.

I raise my eyes to heaven. Teeth clenched, knees wedged against the well, I circle the stone with my arms and heave. Pain digs into my lower back, but the well-stone lifts—barely—and I stagger sideways. As my torn fingers fail, the stone crashes onto one side of the well, breaking off shards of rock as it topples and thuds to the ground.

With throbbing hands, I soak our empty bread sack and dribble water over Ishmael's cheeks to try to rouse him. His eyelids twitch ever so slightly, and I trickle a

few drops into his mouth. At first he chokes, but finally he swallows. We will not go down to the dead today.

When I wake, chilled, night has come. I check Ishmael, but he is covered and still sleeping. Not until I curl back beside him and lie quietly do my tired senses absorb what must have awakened me: Indistinct but unmistakable, the living sounds of men and animals are coming towards us from the east. I push myself to my feet. Torches glimmer faintly in the distance. Truly, El Shaddai is the most terrible of gods.

After drinking my fill, I replenish our waterskin before gathering Ishmael once more in my arms. Still half asleep, he mutters fretfully until I resettle his body against mine. "There, there," I croon, "you're all right."

Even with the moon's light, I can barely see two paces in front of us, but I stumble on, scraping into rocks and prickly bushes, heading always toward the torchlights, bearing my child toward the hospitality of strangers. Toward the mercy of strangers. My aching arms tighten their hold. O Ishmael, be well. Tear your crooked blessing from the heavens and grow strong. One day your name will strike fear into your kinsmen. One day, may I live to see it, the sons of your father will cry out: Ishmael the viper, the calamity, and bitter gourd.

## HAGAR SPEAKS OF STONES

I sleep beneath a dew-mound in Paran,  
beneath a heap of stones gathering moisture  
from the morning. Damp rocks like tear-full fists  
that once tendered life to dry roots.

Forgotten now the ancient hopeful ones  
who placed such stones against young trunks, urged growth  
green fruitfulness from soil rarely rained upon,  
barren as a ninety-year-old womb.

Forgotten too the oak that flourished here  
countless seasons after Ishmael buried  
me with grief gray ashes poured upon his head,  
incense rising over the acrid odor of death.

Ishmael, my own, Abram's half-remembered  
heir, who knows now that you fathered clever  
sons? that your wife was dark and comely  
as the tents of Kedar? that you honored your mother?

Only a few hard stones of story  
endure as monuments to the lives we  
lived so long ago: the crooked promise,  
the casting out, desert, desolation,  
thirst.

## HOUSEHOLD GODS

## 1.

My fingers trace the circle eyes, hard knobs of breast, smooth rounded trunk of the brown clay Asherah figurine I hold in my lap like a child's toy. The coldness of the sloping ground seeps through my skirts. Above me, the oak tree's spreading branches hide the moon, cover me with a darkness deeper than night. Here on this high place, the tree may be a holy one, may gather the power of a god, may point to the heavenly dwelling of Asherah herself. But we who dwell in Israel's tents are strangers on this hillside, merely travelers on the nearby road that leads from Bethel to Ramah and have no knowledge of the holy places that may surround us. This thing of clay I hold in my hands is a paltry charm—only a semblance of Asherah herself, the consort of El, the mother of seventy gods. The memorial pillar for my sister Rachel is grander, a rough white stone heavy as grief. It stands as high as she did until yesterday; its broad flat top and wind-shaved surfaces catch the moonlight. Just as she always captured the attention of everyone and the love of Jacob, our husband.

\* \* \*

Who is left to remember the truth of the first time Rachel smote the sense from him? More than thirty cycles of seasons have run their course since then. I have wondered, though, as often as a traveler through the desert yearns for water, how things might have been different. What if *I* had been the one to greet him at the well instead of Rachel? He'd journeyed all the way from Beer-sheba, after all, and she was the first young woman he met, the first of his mother's people to share with him the kiss of peace.

Of course, he was delighted. I wasn't there, but I can picture him showing off, straining his less-than-ample shoulders to lift the well-stone so the pretty young girl could water her father's sheep. No doubt the other shepherds stood around, nodding and clicking at the little rooster. No one ever mentions to Jacob how the size of that well-stone has grown with his retelling over the years—at last count, ten able men could scarcely have lifted it. Jacob, Jacob, Jacob—ever the sly one, a crafter of bargains, yet even as a young man, not known for mighty deeds. So he guards this story like a store of grain in the famine-time. I'm sure he'll be repeating it to little Benjamin before the child can walk. And in Jacob's mind, the strength of the sudden devotion he felt for Rachel has doubtless increased tenfold, along with the size of that well-stone.

Or perhaps I simply hate, even now, to acknowledge the force of the passion that drew them together. For how many years did I choke on the bitter taste of their desire for one another? Yet here is where it ends. They are parted at last, not by me, not by Jacob's realization that *I* am his first wife, the manager of his household, the mother of many sons, who deserves his highest regard. They are parted by the fruit of their need, the child of my sister's sorrow.

\* \* \*

Zilpah and little Bilhah and even Rachel were still children when Jacob came to us, and though I had begun plumping into womanhood, I knew much less about the world than I thought. Yet surely our father, Laban, should have known to expect sorrow from a man like Jacob, a man forced to flee from his own father's house. Ah, well, I suppose sorrow enters where it will, whether you show it hospitality or not. I have learned that much from all these years of sisters and children and sojourning wherever the livestock can thrive.

The first evening that Jacob arrived in Paddan-aram, I was the one who washed his feet. While the sheep were still watering at the well, Rachel raced home to find Father, and the two of them hastened back to show our cousin a proper welcome, to offer the son of Rebekah the shelter of his uncle's house. In the second day of her woman's time, Naomi kept to her mending, and I was the one left to oversee the cooking and make preparations for our guest—with Zilpah following me around like a thistle caught in my skirts. Perhaps because my own blood had so recently woken from the sleep of childhood, I had little patience with Zilpah in those days. Besides, what is more trying than "help" from a seven-year-old who can hold a thought no longer than she can hold a gazelle's hind foot? After she dropped a jar of dill weed on my toes, I ignored her protests that Bilhah was a baby and sent them both down the hill to play. And once I'd added lamb to the pot in honor of our guest and the stew was bubbling, I left old Abigail in the courtyard to watch the fire, pull the last loaves of flatbread from the oven, and finish cutting cucumbers while I arranged Father's festal cushions around the table and filled the footbasin.

When I saw Jacob's pale forehead, modest beard, and slim, straight figure next to the dark, hairy burliness of my father, I was glad that I had chosen our finest linen towels, and scented them with aloes and cassia. How carefully I dried each hardened heel, the tender valleys beside his ankles, the soft tight caves between his toes. He smiled and nodded his thanks and called me "cousin" in a voice like a deep reed flute.

Though I insisted that Rachel go ahead and eat in the courtyard with the women, she finished quickly and kept hovering by the doorway, offering to serve a turn at refilling bowls, pouring more wine, replenishing platters of dates, figs, honey, and

cheese. “That Jacob, our own cousin, isn’t he fine-featured?” Rachel spoke softly, but—I thought—not softly enough. What if he should hear her? She was such a child. Wide-eyed and breathless, she described his courtesy at the well. “Isn’t he kind? And strong for one so slim?”

The only food I ate that night were some leftover dates and cheese as I cleared away the dishes. When that was done, I refilled Father’s and Jacob’s wine cups and sat against the wall in case they should need anything else. After preparing a bowl of hyssop tea for Naomi’s peakedness, Abigail went along with her and the little girls to lie down. “By all means”—I encouraged her to go. “I can look after everything here.” But then, as if completely unaware that I longed for her to leave, Rachel slipped into the room and with barely a glance in my direction settled down next to me. Perhaps because she was delicately formed, with a face as bright as Ishtar herself, people tended to think of Rachel as fragile and agreeable and, for most of her life, rushed to take care of her. But Rachel rarely needed their help. I may have been tall for a woman and stronger than most, but through all our years, from girlhood till these last hard days, there were few contests between us that Rachel the ewe-lamb did not win.

These contests between brothers and sisters—they vanquish us more secretly than skilled assassins, more thoroughly than the armies of shepherd kings. But if I ponder too many family sorrows, I’ll never have the strength to rise from this place. And Jacob did explain about the trouble with his brother Esau before accepting a firm place in our father’s household. Certainly, that’s to his credit, even though his tongue had been loosened by several cups of Father’s finest wine. I can still see him, hunched forward, both palms pressing the low table, telling how, with his mother’s help, he had tricked

blind old Isaac into pronouncing over him, the younger twin, the paternal blessing meant for Esau, the elder. I wondered what his father, this Isaac, must be like to deserve such treatment, especially from a wife. Rachel's and my mother, Miriam—our father's one wife—had died of desert fever years before, along with Zilpah's mother, Jael. Since then, our father had kept only the concubine Naomi, Bilhah's mother. Was this why? Did he worry that a wife would cheat him? That as the years slipped away and his powers failed, he would lose control of his household? Now I may roll my eyes at such innocence, but at the time I was too young to reckon the depleted state of father's holdings or recognize his reluctance to squander them on the *mohar* for a bride who—he had learned through hard experience—might not even survive long enough to provide him a son. After all, if a man was only going to have girls, at least slave daughters required no dowries.

I do remember being surprised that as he listened to Jacob, Father seemed cheered rather than worried. When Jacob told how he had worn his brother's clothes reeking of Esau-sweat and dung-smoke and animal blood, and strapped goatskins on his arms to fool their father into thinking smooth-skinned Jacob was hairy Esau, Father slapped his thighs. He grinned and nodded when Jacob described how he and his mother had convinced Isaac that the tough old sheep they cooked with extra garlic and peppers was actually venison, newly killed and dressed by Esau. If it was shame that kept Jacob's face turned toward his knees as he revealed the low swindle that had provoked Esau's threats against his life and exiled him from home, Laban's response must have surprised him. Why Rachel and I so easily excused Jacob's admitted deceit, I can scarcely explain—except that we were both smitten into foolishness and only too eager to accept

our father's acceptance of our well-mannered, well-formed cousin. When Jacob finally grew silent, Father reached for him—tipping over a ewer of wine. He grabbed Jacob's face, kissed both his cheeks, and embraced him with the fervor of a bridegroom. "My own sister's son," he cried. "Rebekah the clever has sent me a son!"

\* \* \*

Those first weeks that he stayed with us, Jacob worked as hard as any son could have worked for a father. Every night before he carried his pallet to the roof, he would ask, "Uncle Laban, what task for tomorrow?"

I would come to understand that Jacob deferred to my father in those early days out of regret for the way he had treated his own, but, whatever the reason, he could not have been more solicitous. Even doing woman's work didn't seem to bother him. One morning soon after he arrived, he volunteered to carry the extra water jars for Rachel and me, to save us our second trip to the well. So heartfelt were his thanks for a mended cloak, a sharpened knife, the wine-soaked bread and parched grain I added to his sack when he was working in the fields or pasturing the sheep, I pondered other ways to earn his praise, to hear him say my name with a warm voice. I washed his clothes twice a week, ground pomegranate rinds to dye his turban a deeper yellow, added delicacies to his food sack: pears, apricots, quince. What would I not have done to win Jacob's favor? But after weeks had passed and he and my father discussed the terms of his wages, the daughter whom Jacob agreed to work for, the bride he pledged to earn with a *mohar* of seven years' labor, was Rachel, not me.

For months I carried my broken pride like branches of thorn against bare skin. I hardly spoke to Rachel. Though she looked like our dead mother, I could barely endure

seeing her bronze-flecked hair and eager black eyes in the early light of our morning walks to the well. I imagined pinching her peach-skin cheeks until she screamed, until her face was brown with bruises, ugly as a leper's. I considered adding gourd seeds to Jacob's stew to make him sick or rubbing fresh dung on the roof where he slept. I told myself that his beard was too thin, his eyes too small, his Canaanite speech too slow. Out loud, I complained about his handiwork—the gate he built for the sheepfold was too flimsy, the bricks he molded to patch the oven were too large.

But when I had grown tired of my anger, I considered how long seven years could be, and decided on another course: to help Jacob understand the mistake he was making by choosing Rachel instead of me. Again, I became the helpful handmaid, the generous overseer of my father's household. We fell into our rhythm of life, and if I had no reason to think that Jacob might be regretting his choice of a bride, he did treat me, as he always had, with the consideration due a sister. I tried to convince myself that Jacob held me in that high esteem men reserve for sisters over wives. As the proverb says: *Young man, a worthy sister is like wisdom, a treasure through all of your life.* But I should have remembered a different saying: *Like snow in summer, or rain in harvest, honor for a fool is out of place.*

Oh well, I suppose being young and being foolish are almost the same thing. At least my foolishness carried no sword, never turned itself loose as a scourge to those in its path. Not like my boys, my Simeon, my Levi . . .

Jacob told us, all those years ago, how he and his descendants were meant to be a blessing to all they encountered in cities and fields, on deserts and plains—in places far and wide. He told us that the One Most High, El Shaddai, the god his fathers

worshipped, held sway over all the earth—not only over Canaan—and had blessed the children of Abraham to serve as a kind of salt to people everywhere. I marveled at his words, kept them in my heart and hoped they might be true.

And so the years passed like afternoon breezes from the west that bring summer dew and winter rain. While they are blowing, one forgets about the hot south winds from the desert that eventually follow. One hot wind did parch us for a time—when Naomi died trying to give birth to a child who refused to be born. We all grieved, but our Bilhah almost waned into nothingness. For two days she sat in the dirt beside her mother’s and the baby’s grave, staring at her knees. Only Rachel could coax her to eat as much as a crust of bread. Her thin face smudged with ashes she refused to wash away, her hair tangled and mud-streaked, Bilhah uttered no word to any of us until Rachel finally sat down in the dirt beside her, pulled her into her arms, and rocked back and forth cooing, “Hah-hah, Hah-hah, precious Hah-hah.” *Hah-hah* had been Naomi’s name for her—because of the short, bird-like laugh that happy little Bilhah had used more than speech. When Rachel called our little sister by this name, the hot wind began to cool. And afterwards, our Hah-hah followed Rachel around with eyes almost as adoring as Jacob’s.

Not that Jacob let himself waste time or useless words on his own lovesickness. Indeed, he seemed to pour his heart into plans for improving Laban’s fields and flocks and fortune. Soon enough, with Jacob’s oversight and hard work—and perhaps, as he insisted, the help of his god—Father’s crops and herds increased, and we all prospered. Even Rachel’s beauty ripened as the years passed, nurtured as surely as grapes on the vine by her knowledge of Jacob’s devotion. As they say, *good tidings make supple*

*bones*, and what could be more welcome news than the ardent approval of a pleasant, clever young man who is one's beloved?

I tried not to dwell on their feelings for one another, and if I didn't quite believe that I would one day gain Jacob's love for myself, I did savor the simple joy of being near him, being able to hear and help with what Father called "his strange little dreamings"—to add a late planting of spelt to our early crops of barley and millet, to try growing melons along the banks of the wadi that cut through the northern pastureland toward the river. Jacob was always thinking of something new. I was proud to be the one who helped him convince Father to breed extra donkeys so we could trade them at the market in Haran. After a few years, we were bringing home intricately carved lampstands of cedar and acacia, the finest bleached linen from Egypt, bolts of green and gold silk from the East.

Caring so much for Jacob and glad to prolong my time with him, I didn't lament Father's slowness in arranging a marriage for me, the older sister, even when Zilpah reported that some of the women were speculating about my supposed deficiencies behind my back—weak eyes? lame hip? sharp temper? But I remember the mantle of dread that covered me the night I overheard Jacob reminding my father that his seven years of labor for my sister were almost accomplished, that it was time to begin preparations for the wedding feast.

"Jacob, Jacob." My father strung his words out with exaggerated feeling. From my cot in the women's room, I could imagine him clasping Jacob in a great, swaying hug, the damp force of his kisses on Jacob's cheeks. "Son of my heart," he insisted, "such pain you give me. How did I let you talk me into such a bargain? But you are

right. My word is my word, and the time has come to let you steal the jewel of my house.”

Rachel lay beside me, so close I could hear her breath catch, but I closed my eyes, and neither of us spoke.

The few words of Jacob’s reply were too soft for me to hear, but in answer Father bellowed, “Sons from your loins. Grandchildren.”

I don’t know when my father decided he would cheat crafty Jacob with a trick of his own. Or whether he imagined he was doing me a kindness. When you take a path through the desert, ever-changing winds shift the sands. The journey back never appears as it was.

I remember little of the three days of prenuptial feasting, except how much they hurt. How much I hated the smells of roasting lamb and spitted fatlings, simmering pots of lentils and leeks, honey cakes dusted with cinnamon. I wanted to clap my hands over my ears at the sounds of clay rattles and tambourines, goatskin drums and raucous singing, to turn away from the sights of dancers lunging and whirling, revelers drunk on date wine and beer. And, most painful of all, there was Jacob, happy as I had never seen him, playing tag with the children, laughing at the old men’s stories, savoring every morsel of food thrust upon him by the women and declaring, with hands upraised and a smile tender as that of a babe in swaddling clothes, “It’s a delicacy, a delight, a dream.”

On the morning of the fourth day, when the women guests went to prepare the bridal tent, I couldn’t make myself join old Abigail and the others. How could I hang garlands of cyclamen and white pimpernel, and arrange cedar boughs and sprays of minty hyssop along the tent floor for Jacob and my sister? How could I listen to the married

women's knowing banter about the shape of Jacob's lips or the leanness of his loins as they hid forked mandrake roots beneath the marriage cushions, placed clusters of dates on either side of the bed and scattered caper berries for fruitfulness?

I waited in the house with Rachel as Hah braided her hair and laid out her wedding garments. The fragrance of incense and sweet calamus wafted through the rooms. Though Hah was still a girl, probably not yet finished growing, Rachel had requested our younger slave-sister as part of her perpetual dowry when she married. Not as strong as Zilpah but certainly more clever, Hah was already a skilled weaver—though quick-wittedness and accomplishments were not what endeared her to Rachel: since Naomi's death, Hah would have walked barefoot through burning thorns for her.

"What a shame," I said, as I watched Hah fold the broad-striped cloak Rachel would wear when her nights in the wedding tent were over, "that none of Jacob's people could be here for the celebration."

Rachel merely shrugged. "The journey is a hard one." For at least the third time, she bent down and gathered up the fine new sandals Jacob had given her to wear when she came to him. She fingered their heavy leather soles and gilded thongs. Gilded thongs—whoever heard of such impractical extravagance? "He says his mother will rejoice when she hears of our union, his father's heart will be glad." Rachel clasped the sandals to her breast. "He says that my feet are lovely"—she closed her eyes—"that *my* presence on our marriage day is all that matters to him."

I peered at her perfectly ordinary feet and wondered how I would survive the coming hours and days. And years.

“Hah, don’t forget the myrrh.” Rachel stooped before the cedar chest that held her most treasured possessions, the ones she would carry with her into her married life. Across its top the blue silk marriage veil lay draped, waiting to make her a bride. “You should anoint my hands before I dress,” she said, placing her sandals on the rug next to the chest as carefully as if they were wholly crafted of gold.

No sooner had Hah scurried away to fetch the myrrh jar than Father appeared in the doorway. To give Rachel his blessing, I assumed. But he drew us both to him, one under each arm. “Daughters, I must tell you.” Though he slurred the words slightly, his tone was deliberate, and only later would I wonder if he held us that way to avoid looking either of us in the eye. “When the lots are thrown,” he continued, leaning heavily on us, “they most often give easy news to one at the same time they give hard news to another.” His cloak reeked of sour beer and sweat.

I had no idea what he was talking about and found myself staring out the small window at a single quivering palm frond, from where I stood, all that could be seen of the three date palms Jacob had planted near the house soon after he came.

“You both know,” said Father, “that Jacob and I have a marriage contract. And we are family, we are all family.” He squeezed my shoulder and paused. “I know that you, Rachel, have been planning to wear the marriage veil today. You have made,” he paused again, “preparations. But both of you,” the sinews of his arm tightened along the back of my neck, “hear now the word of my mouth: my sister’s younger son has agreed that it would be a greater honor for him to take Leah, the older daughter, as his bride.”

For a long moment, the weight of these words and his strong arm kept Rachel pressed to our father’s side, and I was still absorbing what they meant when she twisted,

wrenched away from us, and moaned like a sick ewe. “No,” she choked out, holding up three fingers against the evil eye, “no.” Fiercely, wild-eyed, she stared at our father’s face. “I don’t believe it,” she challenged him, then started to back away.

I could feel Father’s body stiffen as his arm left my shoulder. Two quick steps toward Rachel, and he backhanded her across the face. “You forget who you are,” he thundered.

Rachel covered her right cheek and fell to her knees, her other hand grasping her stomach. She rocked back and forth like a woman keening over a dead child, but made no sound.

My mind felt heavy and dull as a stone jar. I couldn’t remember the last time Father had struck Rachel or me, not since we were children. What was I seeing and hearing? Good news? For years I had dreamed that Jacob would shake off the silken cords of my sister’s beauty and whisper in my ear, “You are the one, Leah. You are my heart’s desire, my chosen bride.” Was this what I had wanted?

In the doorway, Hah stood watching us, the jar of myrrh clutched to her chest. “Bilhah,” our father said, quietly, but his use of her given name cautioned us all to heed his words. He brushed his palms together once as if ridding them of dust, and then clapped them together—as one seals a bargain. “The marriage contract has been changed. Leah will be the one given to Jacob tonight, so you will remain here—with Rachel.” He stepped to the door and pried the large, curved jar of myrrh from Hah’s arms, then, with a tilt of his head, motioned for her to go. “Bring Rachel a cup of wine. She needs calming.”

Looking down at the myrrh jar he was holding, Father frowned and finally carried it to the table along the wall. With a face closed to questions, he placed one hand on my head as if giving me a blessing. “Leah, you will wear the wedding veil tonight. Prepare yourself to be a worthy bride. I’ll send Zilpah to tend you.”

And thus it came to pass that I was dazed and speechless and shy when Jacob led me, wearing gilded sandals and the long silken veil intended for my sister, into the marriage tent scattered with caper berries and garlanded with flowers. And in the morning, when I set aside the veil that had covered my nakedness during the night, when I greeted the eye of the day with the blushes of a new bride, Jacob awoke with a headache from too much wine to discover that he had been cheated. “What have you done to me?” he cried, and I thought for a moment he would strike me.

I sat still as death, understanding everything in my bones. In the night, when he had fallen asleep beside me murmuring “Rachel, my dove,” his tongue had not betrayed him. Jacob had not agreed to change one sister for another; such a thought was as far from his mind as the desert is far from the sea. No, Jacob the trickster had himself been tricked by the lies of his Uncle Laban.

“My father said--” I whispered.

That’s all Jacob waited to hear. Wrapping his wedding cloak around him, he charged from the tent like an angry bear, wounded just enough to be dangerous. I sat in the dirt among the cedar boughs, holding the gilded sandals to my breast, too shamed and hurt to cry.

And my sister Rachel, she would tell me later, when she wanted to be cruel, how Jacob had found Father in the courtyard eating breakfast and had slapped a bowl of curds

from his hands. How Jacob had spat on the hem of Father's cloak and called him a viper, a buzzard, a pile of white-washed dung. And then, because he could not live without the woman he loved, because he wanted nothing more in this world than to make Rachel his wife, to share tents and children with her, to offer her the fruits of his labor and the promise of his God, how he had agreed to our father's outrageous terms: Jacob would work *another* seven years for his chosen bride. He would finish the marriage week with me, the older sister, and then he would marry Rachel, the younger. A single feast could serve for us both. Jacob placed his hand on our Father's thigh, and the two men swore an oath on it.

And so, for one night only, was Jacob truly mine. In all the years that would follow, for all the nights I would lie in my husband's arms, those first few hours were the only time I ever believed that he wanted me more than he wanted Rachel. And that one night was a lie.

\* \* \*

Even before Father's duplicity opened a breach between them, after all the years of sleeping on Laban's roof, Jacob was eager to establish his own household, to pitch his own tents. To Jacob, a tent was familiar shelter, a reminder of places he had left behind. But more than that—when the truth of the nut was cracked, despite his enthusiasm for improving our harvests and his skill at sharp trading—Jacob was a herder at heart. As the proverb says, *train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it*. So it was with Jacob. Encamped near the animals that had always provided his chief livelihood, he felt at home. Their pungent smells and the music of their grunts and bleatings brought him comfort.

Thanks to Jacob, Father had prospered like a fruitful vine. He could afford to hire another overseer for the crops and the bartering, which freed Jacob to dedicate himself to the growing flocks of sheep and goats. And as the livestock multiplied, and regularly required fresh pastures for grazing, Jacob understood that living and traveling alongside the animals was what we—and the two young bondsmen Laban was willing to spare—needed to do.

“The house will be empty without you,” said Laban, but he offered no argument. No argument at all. By then, Father must have already formed his own plans to furnish the house with a new wife, to sweeten his old age with new children. He could only have hoped, and perhaps sacrificed to Nintur and Tammuz, for what Tana’at would eventually give him—a brace of scrawny sons.

In pleasanter days, before all these marriages, Jacob had told us the story of how his father, Isaac, had greeted his new bride, Rebekah, when she arrived in Canaan all the way from Paddan-aram in the company of his father’s servant Naboth. Although Isaac had never seen Rebekah, he knew immediately who she must be, this slender girl walking toward him through the barley field at dusk. In addition to her marriage veil, she wore the six gold bracelets he had sent her as a betrothal gift. “The Lord be praised,” he said to Naboth. Then he took Rebekah by the hand. “Your journey is finished,” he said, and when she answered, “So be it,” he led her to the fine two-room goat-hair tent he had prepared for his bride. Embroidered cushions, brightly woven carpets, ceramic hanging lamps, a sturdy new loom. Jacob was determined to do no less for the woman he married.

From the high place where the caravan of time sometimes leads us, I can look back with a measure of pity for Jacob. His hopes were spoiled, too. He had to leave behind the beautiful mother who loved him and must have seen my delicate sister as a fitting balm for his loneliness. Perhaps he felt guilty that his mother had been provoked to plot against his father on his behalf and promised himself that Rachel would never need to scheme against him. No, he and his precious Rachel would cleave to one another and live in perfect love to the end of their days. If, as Jacob is always saying, the God of Abraham and Isaac watches all, what must he think of the spectacle we put before him?

When Jacob realized he would be taking two brides instead of one, he hastily arranged with my father for two identical tents as well. At least that. Although Rachel and I shared, along with Hah and Zilpah, the cooking chores, baking-brick ovens and stewpots, and ate together each evening after we had fed Jacob and the herdsmen, at least I had some small domain of my own, some refuge from my sister's happiness.

But it was still hard to bear. Even now I can taste the bitter yearning that flavored those first few weeks of marriage. Jacob, Jacob, Jacob. Watching how he leaned closer to Rachel whenever she spoke, how he smiled with amazed gratitude every time she handed him a crust of bread, I realized what a tepid offering his toleration was. He rarely lay with me except during Rachel's uncleanness. No matter how I tried to please him, no matter how tender he seemed when we were alone together, he always returned to her. And so my days stretched on like pillars of salt, one after the other.

In those days, the mere thought of Father filled my mouth with curses a daughter could not speak, and yet I missed Abigail's familiar, wrinkled face with a keen longing. I also missed solid walls, the courtyard for cooking and greeting visitors. Besides Jacob

and my sisters, Alep and Uman were the only creatures on two legs we ever saw. And “saw” was the right word. Whoever heard those gangly brothers say a thing? Every evening one of them would tag along into camp with Jacob, eat his dinner-portion, and take his brother’s back to the watch-place. In the morning, the other would appear like a sad destiny to do the same. For weeks, I could only tell them apart because Alep always carried his olive-branch shepherd’s staff with him. Such was my life: half a day’s journey from the house of my childhood, separated from what my life had been by the impenetrable blue silk of a wedding veil, I had only the homesick Zilpah, who sneezed and coughed like one caught in an endless dust-storm and whose eyes watered whenever she entered the tent, for comfort. We were a miserable pair.

And so one day, when the sun was high, when Jacob returned from tending the flocks for a mid-day rest and followed Rachel into her tent, I chose a sharp-bladed knife from the cooking supplies and slipped away to a shady hillside east of the sheepfolds, where no one would follow me. I remember looking out across the chewed, trampled grassland and thinking how thorough the animals had been. Beneath a young oak I sank, and as its knobby bark pressed into my back, I clenched the knife in my fist atop one bent knee. Staring at the dark blade, I considered slashing my face to make myself ugly. If my cheeks were ruined with scars, Jacob would have reason to despise me. I pinched the soft flesh between my fingernails. Then I imagined slicing the skin from my palms—the illumination of physical pain, the satisfaction of being as useless to Jacob as I felt. Perhaps he would even pity me, like a lame beggar in the streets of Haran. My damp armpits itched; the sky deepened; no insect whined, no songbird twittered in the still, dire heat. Drawing the flat of the blade across my neck, I debated how best to pierce my throat

so I would die as quickly as possible. But I did none of these things. Instead, I sprawled on my stomach and stabbed the ground again and again until the hard bronze blade broke against the rocky dirt.

2.

Shame covers me at the thought, but I'm afraid that when I could not hurt myself, I loosed my unhappiness on Zilpah. At home, she had weeded the herb garden, worked in the fields, spun wool to fine and coarse yarns, but never tended the flocks. Now she, along with the rest of us, had relinquished to Father and his serving-men the daily labors of seedtime and harvest. Poor Zilpah. In those early days before the onslaught of children, whenever Jacob needed help, she never complained about minding, even shearing, the foolish, quick-breeding sheep, though they were far more numerous than the testy goats. So it pains me to admit that when she started finding excuses to avoid milking the goats or checking their hooves for embedded stones, I accused her of being a lazybones. And when, night after night, she kept sneezing and coughing under the goat-hair roof, I hissed at her and ordered her to stop. I may have even scolded her for being the cause of Jacob's reluctance to visit our tent. Too caught up in my own misery, I suppose, to consider hers. But one afternoon, when the two of us sat outside in the tent-shade with Rachel and Bilhah, preparing the sticky black goat hairs for weaving into sackcloth, I finally looked up across a lump of plucked skins and noticed that not only were Zilpah's eyes pink and damp and her face a puffy grimace, her hands were covered with small red spots.

*Leprosy.* As the word formed in my thoughts, I shrank back and curled my fingers into my chest. A moment later, I had scrambled to my knees and drawn up her

sleeves. Careful all the while not to touch her skin, I inspected Zilpah's face, neck, and forearms for other signs of sickness. The bumps didn't rise much above her wrists, though her skin elsewhere bore raised, pink streaks. "What's the matter with your hands?" I asked. "How long have they been like this?"

Zilpah flung down the skin she had been scraping and held up her hands, fingers spread wide. "I told you," she said, a trace of accusation seasoning her speech, "I keep getting these bumps. They go away, but then they come back. And they itch."

"She's been complaining about them for some time," Hah confirmed, barely looking up from the sackcloth in her lap that she was mending. "I suggested a fig poultice two days ago. Did you try it?"

Disdaining even to glance at Hah, Zilpah continued, "I've rubbed my hands and arms with clear oil and wrapped them in new wool the last two nights," she lowered her palms level with her knees, "and when I first wake up in the morning, they seem better."

"Fig poultice," repeated Hah.

"Too bad old Abigail isn't here," tutted Rachel, as if she had an opinion worth offering. "She could spit on them and mark your tent with new ash."

I stared at Rachel. The wispy tendrils escaping from her braids bothered me almost as much as her unhelpful comment, and I didn't bother to conceal my irritation. "What are you talking about? The spittle from an old one only works on open wounds."

"Has Jacob been told about Zilpah's affliction?" Rachel's question seemed to accuse me of negligence for my handmaid's welfare.

"In all the years of his sojourn with us," I answered, with a haughtiness I didn't feel, "I don't recall that Jacob ever claimed any special skill as a healer. Besides," I

added as I returned to my place in the circle, “for many days *I* have hardly had the chance to speak to our husband.”

Rachel’s sly smile made my face burn. No doubt she was remembering what kept the two of them so long in her tent.

“Perhaps *you* should mention Zilpah’s condition to Jacob,” I said. “Tonight I plan to burn a blue cloth over an open lamp before she falls asleep and let Zilpah breathe the smoke. And if *that* doesn’t cure her, then tomorrow Zilpah and I will return to Father’s house to ask Abigail’s help.” After such measures, how could anyone fault me for neglecting Zilpah?

Alas. How great was my distress upon sacrificing a precious square of blue wool to the cause of Zilpah’s cure only to discover that it helped her not in the least. And Jacob was the one who held the answer to her illness after all.

After the morning meal, I announced that Zilpah’s condition required the two of us journeying to seek Abigail’s aid. Eyes sharp with concern, Jacob asked what was wrong, and as soon as he saw the red spots on Zilpah’s hands and wrists, he clicked his tongue and asked her: “Does touching the goats seem to make them worse? Have you been coughing and sneezing?”

He had seen the goat sickness among his people, and told us all that henceforth Zilpah should not be asked to tend them. We would prepare her a wool-covered booth of her own that she could sleep in except when it rained and she needed the protection of the goat-cloth. “When that happens, Zilpah,” he added, “try sleeping with a veil of wool, and you shouldn’t be bothered too much.

“Thank you,” said Zilpah, sneezing into her sleeve.

Folding his arms over his chest and quirking his head sideways, Jacob squinted one eye in thought. “Wild parsley,” he said slowly, “If I recall, parsley is what helps this sickness. You should eat it as often as you can.”

From that moment on, Jacob could do no wrong as far as Zilpah was concerned. She must have been more troubled by her malady than I realized. Once she understood about her goat-sickness, she accepted her new life among flocks and herds with a lightened heart and rarely complained about anything again. How many times have I heard her tell the children: “a song weighs less than a groan”?

I’m glad she never tried to give me such advice. I might have beaten her, and then I would have more to regret than I do now. Besides, my heart would eventually find another solace.

Since the first night that Jacob lay with me in the marriage tent, my body had felt strangely different—no longer the familiar knitting of arms, legs, shoulders, and back for harvesting barley, carrying water jugs, grinding grain, and firing ovens. Now I was a bowl waiting to be filled, waiting for the staunched blood, the thickening belly that would make me a mother, and precious in Jacob’s eyes. As precious as Rachel.

But Rachel was waiting, too. While we lived in Father’s house, her moonbleeding and mine—and more recently, Zilpah’s—most often began together, though Rachel’s would last several days longer. Even before she wed Jacob, her womb expressed its anger at her childlessness with stabbing pains as her woman’s blood wasted itself upon the binding rags. Since our joinings with Jacob, though, her cycles had been erratic and even more fierce. At such times, I felt closest to my sister. Biting her sleeve to keep from crying out, face drained of color and charm, Rachel reminded me of the

forlorn, motherless child who had looked to me for comfort when we were small. The sayings of the old ones assured that *moon-blood travail means an easy birthing*, but Rachel waited in vain for that prediction to come to pass.

Three moons after our marriage to Jacob, her body seemed to relent, failed to spend its blood in accord with her sisters. I can still remember the tightness in my chest, the bitterness in my throat as night after night Jacob entered her tent, and morning after morning Rachel met us at the cooking fire with a simpering mouth and eyes as wide as a foolish ewe, the *Rahel* for whom she was named. *I am Leah* I would tell myself, worth more than any sheep. *Le'ah*, little cow, a substantial, long-lived creature. Even as Jacob told us, the sacrifice most pleasing to his god.

Yet before her belly swelled, before we were subjected to the sight of Rachel round with Jacob's child and pleased as a sated feast-guest, she turned pale pouring water into the stew-pot one warm afternoon and sank upon the ground. "Leah," she whispered as she closed her eyes, "help me."

And what could I do but call for Hah and the two of us bear Rachel to her tent where we drew up her skirts and covered her bent knees with an old blanket. When she understood what was happening, Hah drew the goat-stone from Rachel's talisman basket hanging in the corner of the tent, placed it in Rachel's palm, and folded her fingers around it. Cradling Rachel's hand in both her own, she began to chant:

*The Lady of the Date Clusters,  
the Goddess of Stony Ground are one.  
Gracious Nintur, we praise you ever.*

*Appease Enlil with this birth of silence  
and grant your daughter a child of noise.*

Gripping the stone in one hand, Rachel clenched my hand with the other until her river of pain overflowed into me, the blood seeped from her loins, and she slept.

At dusk, when Jacob returned from flocks and herds expecting to be greeted by a rich stew and the smile of his favorite, he learned of his Ewe-lamb's plight. In spite of myself, I pitied the torment in his face. At first he said nothing, merely hung his head and lifted the tent-flap to see for himself that Rachel had suffered no lasting harm. He sat with her in the darkness for a few moments and what he said to her I never knew, but he emerged seeming like himself again. "I will erect a standing stone to the God of Abraham and Isaac," he announced. "In thanksgiving for the promise of many sons. To remind the High One that the promise remains unfulfilled between us."

The One remembered all right, smiling, no doubt, as the gods always smile at our feeble attempts to manipulate them. And before another moon had passed, Jacob's seed took root. But this time I was the sister whose skirts showed no stain even as the moon faded and returned, faded and returned. I was the one whose secret smile betrayed her hope of bearing fruit for her husband, of gaining the coveted honor of first mother.

But I said nothing to anyone, lest the evil eye sweep the hope from my belly as it had with Rachel before me. As we carried on our daily tasks, I felt my sister's bitter gaze, and I prayed to Nintur, the Mother of Many, to sustain the life I cradled in my womb, the son (I was certain it was a boy child) being knitted of flesh and bone and his father's need and his mother's yearning.

As Rachel again and again knotted the cord of red wool over her tent flap, and I again and again welcomed Jacob to the bed-rugs in my tent, he must have understood what was happening. How longingly I waited for him to stroke my cheek in the darkness and ask with some small trace of wonder, “Can it be so, Little Cow? A child quickens inside you?” Then he would mold one warm hand to my belly and add in a voice softened by new wisdom: “Now I see that Laban’s crafty trick was instead a happy bargain. Leah, my clever cousin; Leah my fruitful wife. You will be the mother of sons the High One promised.”

I waited to no avail. Perhaps, I told myself, Jacob is being careful not to provoke the evil eye. Perhaps he wants to save me the extra burden of his disappointment should my hopes come to nothing, like Rachel’s. With Zilpah sleeping apart, under her booth of reeds and wool, there was no one except for Jacob to see how my body was changing. But spoken of or not, the babe in my womb kept growing.

And then one mild night at the beginning of the dry season, Jacob and I lay together, yet he made no move to enter me. He simply fitted me against him, my back to his chest, and talked about how fat the animals had grown, how it was almost time to move our tents in search of new grazing lands, and how just today Father had sent a boy to ask if Jacob could spare his workers to help gather in the wheat. The late rains this year meant they still hadn’t finished bringing in the barley—*a bountiful crop, praise be to the God of Abraham and Isaac*—the boy had been told to say. But now the precious wheat was swaying in the fields, ready to be reaped. And Laban was beside himself, bowed over with worry, ready to be ruined if he didn’t have more workers.

“What do you think,” said Jacob, “about sending Zilpah and Hah? Wouldn’t Zilpah be glad to get away from the goats for a few days?” He fingered the knob of my elbow as he tended to do when immersed in thought.

*Enough, I thought, enough—of flocks and crops and all the rest. What will it take to make him notice me? To make him say something about the child rounding my belly?*

But Jacob was a man of guarded speech.

He sent Zilpah and Hah to my father, along with Alep, who wanted to consult old Abigail about some boils on his back anyway. And then Rachel and I were left as the only women in the camp, to face each other all through the day over millstones and kneading stones and oven bricks and distaffs and spindles.

And so it was that on the second morning of our days alone, as Rachel poured grain into the mill, and I turned the stone as I had always done because I was the big sister and stronger, we sang the song for flour-making:

*Harvest the barley, harvest the wheat,  
Thresh it with flail and sledge and feet.  
Winnow away the chaff and the straw,  
Then grind it, grind it, grind it all.*

My part of our task being more strenuous, it was up to Rachel to carry the rhythm and words of the song to steady our labor. Besides, she had a lovely voice. Jacob exaggerated only a little when he declared that her singing could charm the hoopoes from their nests. But I was caught by surprise when she began changing the words:

*Grind it all with pestle or stone  
 Until the day that you make great moan  
 Bring forth a living harvest then,  
 A son to follow the ways of men.*

What could I do but tighten my grip on the mill stone's handle and close my eyes in shame at my earlier thoughts about her pregnancy? Rachel was offering me her acknowledgment and her blessing for the child who grew in my womb. And in the years that followed, when she would grow peevish about her barrenness and use Jacob's favor as a sharp scythe against me, I tried to remember that she had been the first to show welcome to her sister's child when we were both still young, and fruitless.

\* \* \*

It seemed that Jacob had been waiting for Rachel and me to come to peace about the baby before he mentioned it himself. Finally, he did tell me how pleased he was, and as my time drew near, proved a considerate husband: slaughtering a goat to roast even when there were no guests or reason for feasting, gathering almonds and wild honey from the hills above our camp, admonishing me to let Zilpah carry both water jugs back from the well lest I lose my balance and fall. He told me that when the baby came, whether it was daughter or son, I should have the honor of naming it. Perhaps Jacob tried so hard to be kind because he knew that he could never give me what I longed for—a love stronger than wine, more searing than the desert's heat, the kind of love he gave so easily to Rachel. How was I to know that I was only chasing after wind?

When the time came for me to stand upon the birthing bricks, the early rains had already begun. I'll never forget the *thuck-thuck-thuck-thuck-thuck* of the drops on the

tent-roof as the pains hit me in earnest. And Hah chirping into my ear about what a favorable omen the rain was and how fortunate among women was I. If my body being ripped in two hadn't sapped all my strength, I would have pinched her to make her stop. But it was she and Zilpah, veiled in heavy wool, of course, to keep her from sneezing, who stood at my sides and held me up throughout the birthing. I understood why Rachel offered to carry the news to Jacob instead of remaining with me. What a day it was for both of us. Though Abigail had tried to prepare me for the travail of delivering a child, no words, however wise, could have prepared me for the way I would be gutted and changed that day. Still, blessings on her name, Abigail the midwife, Abigail the healer, for traveling all the way from Father's house to catch the babe, bathe him in cassia water, rub salt on his red, wrinkled body, and wrap him in swaddling bands, just as she had done for my sisters and me on the days of our birthing.

And when he had been tended, and his loud cries upon entering the world quieted to a broken, fretful whimper, and I lay still and spent upon my bedrugs—Hah tucking the blankets around me and Zilpah hovering beside me with wine and honey cakes—old Abigail held the child before my eyes and asked, “What name do you give this firstborn son of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham?”

As I reached for him, the tent flap parted and Jacob entered, with Rachel close behind. Drinking in my husband's smiling face, my sister's downcast eyes, I spoke the greeting to the new father of a son in the steadiest voice I could manage, “Good tidings, Jacob, good tidings.” I drew the blanket away from the child's face. “*See, a son—* Reuben. Reuben will be his name.” Then I gathered the bundled babe to my breast and

gazed on the wide forehead and gently-curved nose so like his father's, and guided his searching pink lips to my nipple.

\* \* \*

As they say, *plans belong to mortals; answers belong to the gods*. All the time that Reuben was growing inside me, I had imagined how he was going to change Jacob's feelings for me. And when he was finally born—a boy, healthy and well-formed—I waited for my husband's eyes to cast a brighter light when they gazed on me, for his arms to offer new tenderness because of this son we shared.

I waited without reward from my husband.

But the child—what a deep surprise was there. Each tiny finger, tuft of hair, fig-soft cheek, and dimpled knee broke my heart. And the plump little arms always reached for me and clung and clung with a longing that eased my own. Zilpah and Hah petted and crooned over him, and after Abigail's reports that I had delivered a strapping son, even Father ventured forth from the comforts of home and the arms of his new wife to witness the child's circumcision on the eighth day.

Jacob said it was a wonder the knife didn't slip with Father at his side badgering him about the proper way to grasp the skin and cut. "As if *he'd* ever circumcised a son," Jacob muttered afterwards when he handed our squalling babe to me. The first one is always the worst, of course. How pitiful Reuben's red, wrinkled face seemed to me, how inconsolable his cries as I tried to rock him in my arms, tried to sooth him with singing, tried to give him my breast, and he would not be comforted.

Not until the men had feasted the covenantal cutting of the first male branch of Jacob's line and Father had departed for home did my husband tell me two important

pieces of news. One was the blessing Father pronounced over Reuben when this first grandchild was placed in his arms:

*May he be the first of many brothers  
excelling in rank and excelling in power,  
a deep, wide well of cooling waters,  
a spring in the desert that never runs dry.*

Knowing Father, I pondered this blessing for days, wondering what trick its seemingly gracious meaning concealed. But Father's trick, I think, lay in the other piece of news. His new wife, Tana'at, was already expecting a child.

The thought of Father starting another family to supplant us made me uneasy and must have added its own sting to Rachel's empty arms. Not that I concerned myself with her feelings at the time. If anything, I wrung satisfaction from her listlessness and took pleasure in flaunting my motherhood. I swooped Reuben around like a fat, wingless bird; loudly kissed his forehead, cheeks and chest; talked to him with exaggerated cheerfulness in her presence. No wonder she started keeping to herself. Even if Hah and Zilpah weren't trying to hurt Rachel, they too wheedled and cooed at Reuben to stop his crying, bounced him, patted him, sang him lullabies. Rachel had to watch all of her sisters doting on this son of Jacob who was not hers. She ignored the baby most of the time. But there was the once—when he was just a few weeks old and caught the spotted fever and coughed and coughed and gasped for breath until we all feared he might die. Rachel took a turn with the rest of us then, walking Reuben back and forth, day and night, patting his tiny back, crooning in his ear, pleading with him to heal, cajoling him to be well.

The fever that Reuben survived did its evil elsewhere. Father sent word that they were all sick, even Abigail, and Tana'at had delivered before its time a child too ill-formed to draw breath. When the bondsman appeared bearing news of their sickness, Hah volunteered to return to father's house to nurse the stricken. She cooked broth, carried water from the well to quench their fevered thirsts, and kept Father, Tana'at, Abigail, and even Tana'at's maid, Adah, covered with blankets when they tossed and cried out in the night. As Abigail regained her strength, she had spent the time teaching Hah as much of her healing lore as she could remember. Hah had a gift for learning, and Abigail must have suspected that even though she recovered from the fever, her full strength would never return.

When Hah came back to us after her time at Father's, she carried herself differently—or perhaps we simply saw her with fresh eyes, as so often happens when someone close to you sojourns elsewhere for a while. I suppose we had grown accustomed to thinking of Hah as the youngest, the baby, the link to our own childhoods. But she was almost a woman, and within the year, her blood awakened to the call of the moon.

Hah has always been closer to Reuben than to any of the other boys, even her own, and perhaps the reason lies in this—she came to womanhood as he was coming to life. And I have often thought that the care from so many mothers not only kept Reuben among the living when that fever threatened him but also helped him grow into the kindest of my sons.

Sons, sons, sons. Soon enough my Reuben had a flock of little brothers to toddle after and tend to—Simeon, Levi, and Judah, our pet lion. How that child loved to sneak

up on people, pawing the air with those chubby fists before he pounced onto their backs and roared his squeaky roar. We grown-ups always pretended to be surprised, and terrified, and Reuben would play along too, but Simeon and Levi . . . . It's a wonder Judah didn't lose his pelt. Not having grown up with brothers, I could never get used to the roughness of the boys' scuffles, but Jacob assured me that boys learned important lessons from black eyes and bruised fists. Now I wonder . . . .

I'm not sure when I finally gave up hoping that one more son would make the difference, be the token, prize, charm to change everything and make Jacob love me.  
*Even the cleverest heart is slow to grow wise.*

\* \* \*

Everything seems so urgent, so desperate when we're young. And then we make it so. Poor Rachel. That the sons I bore Jacob failed to alter his feelings for either one of us hardly seemed to matter. She felt them as a reproach—as I hoped she would. Children were the only point they ever argued about, though not in front of me, of course. Rachel had too much pride for that. But who could help overhearing quarrels in the next tent? They started in earnest when Levi was a baby, Simeon already padding around the camp on his sturdy tree-trunk legs and Reuben beginning to ask those endless questions that have no answers—why is honey sweet? why are olives bitter? why do sheep have wool? why are you my mother?

“Why can't you give me a son?” Rachel would plead. “Why don't you keep trying with me until it happens? Leah has three sons now. Three.”

“Why aren’t I more to you than seven sons?” Jacob would answer. “You know I love you. More than anything in this world. Have I ever complained about your not giving me a son?”

“Leah has given you three,” she would spit.

“It’s you I’m slave to your father for,” Jacob would remind her. “Still. Fourteen years. Whoever paid a *mohar* of fourteen years’ labor for a wife? Tell me that.”

“Give me a son or I’ll die.”

Jacob always finished with the same pronouncement: “The God of Abraham and Isaac will give you a child in time, Rachel. In time.”

But I was the one who began growing great with child once more before the year was out.

Zilpah kissed both my cheeks at the news. “You are Nintur’s favored daughter, Leah. As fertile as the Mother herself. All these sons.”

As always, I waited to let Jacob discover the rounding of my body for himself as we lay in the dark. Once he realized I was pregnant, I knew he wouldn’t sleep with me again until the child was almost weaned. After we had coupled, he stroked the tops of my legs and then up to my belly, where the skin was loose and rippled from having already carried three babies. I could tell by the way his hand suddenly pressed down that he noticed the new firmness, the swelling of life. “Can it be so, Leah?” was all he asked.

Judah’s birth surprised me by being so hard. Both Simeon and Levi had come into the world with lesser pangs than the brother before. I couldn’t have guessed by the easy way they tore from my body how much pain they would cause later. So much for omens. Judah was like a lion ripping my loins. From evening into morning, I paced

between the pains and returned again and again to plant my feet on the bricks, each time thinking that surely the baby would wrench his way to life soon. Finally, even Rachel appeared to help support me against the birthing stool when I sank, limp as dough, and could not rise again.

It was during this birth that I understood what a healer our Hah had become—as skilled as Abigail herself, who hadn't felt the need to attend my labors since Simeon. During the long hours, Hah brewed me hyssop tea to keep me strong, pressed her fingers up and down my spine to relieve the ache, fed me honey to calm me, and worked her palms over my belly to help the baby find its way. Even through my pain, I managed to twinge a smile at the expert way our youngest sister directed her elders to stand here, hold that, breathe thus until at last I threw my head back and the final cry ripped from me.

After Judah's birth, the summer days stretched on and on. I couldn't seem to regain my strength. Zilpah did her best to keep Simeon and Levi busy and out of trouble. She let them play “wandering shepherds” and spend their nights under her wool shelter so that I could at least count on some rest during whatever hours the baby finally drifted off. Reuben followed Hah around as if he were a little lamb, asking her the incessant questions I was too tired to concoct answers for. Rachel took charge of all the cooking and baking, tasks I usually oversaw, and spent countless hours at the loom just inside her tent. We kept our tent-flaps raised because of the heat, and I could hear the slow click, clack of the weaver's beam moving up and down.

One night, before Jacob entered Rachel's tent, he came and sat down beside me as I was giving Judah my breast. The single hanging lamp cast half his face in tremulous

light. His beard had been trimmed, and I thought he looked young, as young as that first day I washed his feet.

“Hardy Leah,” he said, reaching over to finger the fine wisps of black hair that already curved against Judah’s nape. “We’re not used to seeing you like this—not feeling equal to being up and running things.”

*We’re. Why couldn’t he at least tell me what he wasn’t used to?*

“How do you feel? Any change for the better?” He let one hand smooth the side of my face in a rare gesture.

“I’m just tired,” I said. “Tired to my bones.” But as I said the words, I felt my heart thumping a stronger beat and a trace of the old vigor spreading through my limbs.

“This heat doesn’t help,” he said. “The sheep could hardly be bothered to walk to the well to drink today.”

I smiled at his attempt to humor me. “The baby’s finished. Would you like to hold him?” I shifted Judah up against my shoulder and patted his back to settle his stomach.

Jacob reached out to take Judah from me. As he did so, his warm fingers brushed my breast, and my womb quivered. I leaned back into the pile of cushions propping me up and left my breast uncovered.

In Jacob’s hands, the baby squirmed, flailed his arms, and started to cry until Jacob laid him flat, tucked his head into the crook of his arm, swayed him back and forth, and gave him a finger to suck. “*Yadah*—‘Praise to the Almighty.’ The boy’s strong enough. A son to be proud of, Leah. You’ve named him well.”

How my foolish heart leapt at these mild words of approval. “Have you noticed how dark his eyes are already?” I was desperate to prolong those few moments alone with my husband and our baby while our three healthy boys slept just beyond the curtain. I kept reminding myself to remember, remember the timbre of his voice, the interest in his eyes, the way he cocks his head to one side while he’s considering what you say, even his peculiar mixed scent of sweat, grass, goats and sheep.

Jacob glanced down, but Judah’s pale eyelids had closed, the limpness of sleep already overtaking him, though his leaf-soft lips quivered and released, quivered and released to that secret rhythm and need of babies. Voice lowered, Jacob suddenly surprised me by asking, “Are you feeling well enough to do without Hah for a while?”

“What’s happened?” I pulled the robe over my breast and sat up.

“Your father sent a messenger today. Tana’at isn’t well.”

I didn’t need to hear the rest. Reaching for Judah, I reminded him: “Hah serves Rachel. If she can do without her, so can I.”

Thus we all agreed to let Hah spend as much time as necessary at Father’s house to help sickly Tana’at through this birth that she was finally hoping to bring to term before the early rains. Abigail was now predicting twins and didn’t feel strong enough to assist such a birth by herself. Disgusted with Father as I might be over supplanting Jacob as his son—Jacob, who was married to *both* the daughters of his dead wife—I couldn’t bring myself to spend my anger against pitiful Tana’at, who had already suffered three wasted births. Besides, as long as Jacob was still working off the *mohar* for Rachel, we were all obliged to help Father if he asked for it.

Before Jacob left my tent to seek the comfort of Rachel's pallet, he kissed me on the lips and whispered, "Thank you." His warm breath caressed my ear, and I was left to imagine all that he might have intended to thank me for—for showing kindness toward a resented woman; for remaining blameless where my father was concerned; for not needing to be coddled and treated like a child; for being a fruitful vine and a good mother; for having smooth skin and bountiful breasts and bringing him joy.

I'm not sure whether I regained my strength so quickly after that night because it was simply time for me to mend or because my body knew it no longer had Hah to depend upon or because Jacob's notice worked its charm. But I soon took charge again of my children and the cooking, and advising Jacob about the flocks and what crops we could plant so we wouldn't be completely dependent on Father's unreliable good will—and lackluster skill at farming. Jacob's seven years of servitude to our father would come to an end before the next harvest time.

\* \* \*

"Twin boys, neither one any bigger than your hand," Hah told us as we ladled her a bowl of lentil soup some weeks later. She and the two bondsmen accompanying her back from Father's had worn sackcloth coverings to protect them from the drenching rain, but the hem and sleeves of her cloak still managed to get soaked. After wringing out the wet parts, she spread her cloak to dry in the far corner of Rachel's tent and wrapped herself in a blanket. The men, including Laban's workers, had already eaten and rejoined the flocks, Jacob going with them to separate out the animals they would herd back for Father in the morning.

“Both the saddest little runts you ever saw,” she pronounced, accepting a round of flatbread from Reuben and nodding to him with a smile. “But we managed to keep them alive and they’re plumping up.”

One side of the tent had been raised and secured with an extra pair of tentpoles to increase the area sheltered from the rain, which continued to fall steadily but not hard. Rachel and Zilpah and I—and my boys—were all gathered under Rachel’s open tent to welcome Hah back and hear her news.

It’s strange how we accept and even grow attached to the things we’re brought up with—whatever they may be. None of my children, I’m sure, gives a second thought to the perpetual dampness of living in a tent during the rainy season. But I have always remembered fondly my youthful days of living under a solid roof and surrounded by firm walls, especially during the hard winter rains when it’s a constant struggle to stay dry. And poor Zilpah. Anyone else would have kept grouching about the trials of goat-hair for the last twenty-five years.

As Hah spoke, I studied her bright face framed in that thick, raven hair loosed to dry. She was blossoming into a delicate-featured young woman—no doubt from being around Rachel so much, I peevishly observed and then shook myself. “How is Abigail doing?” I asked. “It’s hard to think of her not being able to take care of anything and everything.”

In my lap, Judah fidgeted, and I shifted the cushion we were sitting on, hoping he would get comfortable and relax with his back resting against my chest. Sitting cross-legged on either side of me, Simeon and Levi waited for Zilpah to hand them their bowls. Except for those welcome hours when their small active bodies finally succumbed to

sleep, mealtimes seemed the only moments the two of them weren't in motion—unlike their older brother, who, even as a baby, could lie in one place for long stretches, watching clouds or the shifting shadows cast by the tent lamp, and barely blink his eyes. Reuben carried his bowl over next to Hah and settled himself at her feet.

“Abram and Nahor, that's what he's calling them. What do you think of that?” Hah dipped her bread into the soup and took time to chew and swallow, though she was brimming over with too much news to answer my questions—or wait for us to answer hers. “He named them both himself, I tell you. After all she's been through. A breath away from death this time, a single breath. She'll never be the same.” Lowering her bowl to her lap, Hah slumped forward. “*And* she had dreamed names for them the very night the pains started.” Her gaze swept each of us as she delivered this startling news. “Ishtar fell from the sky and spoke them to her: Onan and Zebul. That's what she said.”

Rachel spared a shake of her head for our father's lack of consideration. Then she narrowed her eyes and fixed them on me. “Abram and Nahor?” She repeated the names slowly.

Hah shrugged. “Those are the names the *teraphim* whispered in his ear. At least that's what he told us when Abigail and I carried the babies out for him to see.”

Distasteful news, to be sure, but I decided not to fuel Rachel's flame about it. Nahor had been Father's and Jacob's mother's grandfather, and Abram was Jacob's grandfather who had journeyed to Canaan and settled there. Giving these family names to Tana'at's sons did sound more like an intentional offense than obedience to the gods—Father's notice that he intended to replace all of us with these whelps of his old age.

“Nahor and Abram weren’t twins, were they?” asked Zilpah, finally ladling some soup for herself.

“Can I have some more?” Simeon tried to stand, still clutching his bowl. I plucked it from him and handed it to Zilpah.

“No, not twins.” I replied.

“Brothers,” said Rachel. “*Our* forefathers.”

Sounding more conciliatory than I felt, I added, “Auspicious names, aren’t they? Sickly babes should wax strong with such names.”

“You don’t really believe the household gods gave him those names, do you?” pressed Rachel, looking at me.

I only gave a quick shake of my head and hoped she would see I didn’t want to say any more in front of the boys. After all, Laban was their grandfather, and there was no need to concern them with inheritance quarrels at their ages.

Hah’s words rushed into the silence. “They’re calling the bigger one with swaths of hair Nahor; the sparrow-sized one, Abram. He’s got no hair at all. Fingernails either. And he’s dark as a moonless night, looks just like Tana’at.”

After finishing his soup and bread, Reuben had wedged himself against Hah’s knee, occasionally patting it as if to reassure himself that she was still there. He looked perfectly content to sit quietly all day if that’s what we wanted him to do.

Levi, on the other hand, had started sliding his empty bowl across the floor mats and making high-pitched noises that sounded like a cross between a donkey and a wolf, so I sopped up the last of my soup and prepared to take him and Simeon and the baby back to my tent while we waited for the rain to break.

\* \* \*

For a brief time after Judah was born, I had known in my bones that Jacob and I were growing closer. When he talked to me, a softer tone in his voice promised real affection. I dared to hope that he was forgetting his bitterness about the marriage trick played on him—and if not forgetting, then at least understanding that *I* was not to blame for duping him.

Soon after Hah returned from father's, though, that new bond between Jacob and me started to fray. I blamed Rachel at the time for distracting him with her demands and complaints, but perhaps that's too simple, and, besides, I don't think she could help herself. Tana'at's feat in bearing twins to our father rankled her to the core, and Jacob's lack of outrage on our behalves perplexed her.

“Let Laban name his sons whatever he chooses,” said Jacob. “What need have I of such a father? The God of Abraham and Isaac will prosper us according to his promise.”

I suppose Rachel was tired of hearing about the God of Abraham and Isaac when she had been waiting almost seven years for that much-petitioned Almighty One to provide her a single living child. Whatever contentment she'd found in accepting her place as the childless—but loved—wife dissolved. If Jacob spent more than a few moments discussing the boys or the herds with me, or complimented me on the cinnamon cakes, she would retreat to her tent, where we would later hear her whining to Jacob, “I knew this would come to pass. I am nothing to you any more. You despise me for not giving you a son.”

In my experience, very few people can look attractive while grumbling, so what baffled me, and seemed unfair, was how lovely Rachel managed to remain even when she was worrying an idea like a loose tooth. “If not for Jacob,” she would mutter while spinning thread or stirring a pot, “Father would still be a poor farmer with a few sheep. He would never have taken on a new wife, let alone become a father again—*of sons*.” She always emphasized the “of sons” part. Sometimes she would add “in his old age” through her gritted milk-white teeth, though Father could scarcely be called ancient. Certainly, he was decades younger than the honored Abraham had been when Jacob’s father, Isaac, was born.

Knowing that much of the increase Jacob provided Father during the first seven years of our marriage would have belonged to Jacob and her if not for the second *mohar* goaded Rachel to a rage beyond the resentment I felt for my trampled heart. As far as she was concerned, not only did Father’s scheming tongue wag in all directions, he was a bald thief, stealing from his own daughter.

Although it’s true enough that *the days fly toward sorrow but crawl toward gladness*, the seventh wheat harvest following our wedding feast did finally approach, and the days of Jacob’s service to our father drew to a close. When Laban sent a messenger bearing sacks of walnuts, almonds, and pistachios as a gift, along with his urging to “Spit a fatling, simmer a stew” because he would join us in two days to commemorate the end of Jacob’s obligation, we should have suspected that he sought some advantage. At that time our camp was a whole day’s journey from the village, and Father averaged less than a visit a year to see us. At sheep shearing time or when they needed to discuss journeys to market—or trade our livestock for Father’s grain and

grapes—Jacob went to him. He had not even bothered to come for Judah’s circumcision, had not yet seen the child.

Yet no sooner had Father dismounted his dust-caked donkey than he pinched each of the boys on the cheek and swooped Judah from me. Raising his youngest grandson high overhead before setting the gasping baby on his hip, he announced, “A pack of sturdy cubs, my Leah, sturdy cubs.” We all gathered to meet Father except for Rachel, who was claiming the excuse of her woman’s time—which often enough did give her misery. During most of Father’s visit, she remained in her tent. It was Zilpah who, without being asked, brought forth a basin of water to wash Laban’s feet.

After the meal, we all left Father and Jacob to their wine cups and dealings, though I let Zilpah put the boys to bed while I puttered around putting things away and then allowed myself to rest a moment or two by the fire’s embers where I could hear what they were saying.

When Jacob mentioned his longing for the red hills of Canaan and his eagerness to return home, Father stretched out his arms as if offering Jacob everything within view. “What do you mean by home?” he said. “Your wives and children are here. The livestock have plenty of grazing land, eh?” He slapped Jacob on the back. “A good plan—to follow after your sheep in a tent.”

“My father, Isaac, is old,” said Jacob in a doleful voice. “I should go to him before it’s too late.”

“You’re a good son.” With one fist, then the other, Laban thumped his chest. The dim light prevented me from seeing him clearly, but I knew he would be closing his eyes as if transported while doing this. After a moment he suggested, “Let us strike a

bargain. You work for me another seven years and I'll pay you for it." He slapped his thighs and continued in a sympathetic tone: "Jacob, consider what I say: How can you go back to your father's house with more children than goats? How will you hold your head up?"

Jacob wasted no breath reminding Father *why* he had accumulated no wealth for himself in fourteen years. "I will agree to sweat and toil for you another seven years," he said, "for half the increase of your flocks."

"Jacob, you're almost a son to me, it's true. But there would be no increase if I didn't own the animals to begin with." He fingered his earlobes while appearing to ponder. "A quarter of the new lambs and kids, a quarter of the wool, and—an extra goat for each of your boys."

"I won't stay for less than a third," countered Jacob. And when Father finally nodded, Jacob gripped his thigh. "Don't cheat me, Old Man, don't cheat me. The God of my fathers will be watching between us."

So from that day, Jacob began building up an inheritance for the sons El Shaddai had promised him, and my sister Rachel became even more desperate to see that at least one of those sons was hers.

When she proposed her plan to gain children through Hah, Jacob reminded her that his grandfather's wife, Sarah, had not remained happy with the arrangement when she asked Abraham to go in to her maid, Hagar. In truth, the woman had groaned and complained to her husband until he cast out the slave mother and child—against every code of decency known to shepherds and farmers alike from the Black Land to Babylonia. But Rachel insisted that this would be different, and reminded Jacob that he

had other sons already, so the two situations were not at all comparable. Besides, she was not asking him to go in to some foreign slave girl. She was proposing that he lie with her half-sister, Bilhah, whom she'd known all her life. Couldn't he at least cast the lots to see what his God thought about the idea?

Finally, Jacob threw up his hands. *How can sticks contend with fire, meat with a knife, a man with a nagging woman?*

Like the rest of us, Hah must have overheard Rachel and Jacob discussing this solution to Rachel's childlessness. She could hardly have helped it—so I suppose she had time to adjust herself to the idea. Whatever she felt about being used to provide Rachel with a child, she never revealed—at least not to me.

Having no choice, I grudgingly accepted *the idea* of Hah bearing Jacob a child, but as the busy weeks twittered by like sparrows with no mention of a pregnancy, I gained some hope that Hah might be barren like Rachel, though I didn't quite allow myself to *pray* that it might be so. At least not with an offering of grain or oil that might have rendered my prayer efficacious.

And then one warm afternoon much like the others before it, Reuben followed Hah into the hills to catch kermes bugs for dye while the younger three boys lay napping inside the tent. Rachel, Zilpah, and I took our distaffs and spindles outside into the tent-shade, and Zilpah separated clumps of combed wool into three equal piles. Always eager to demonstrate her proficiency at yarn- and cloth-making, Rachel challenged us to see who could produce the thickest thread. Zilpah answered her with a boldness that surprised me, “Well, since Hah's not here, we know who's going to spin the strongest thread before we start. A better question is, who's going to deliver Hah's child?” She

stared at Rachel, who had been conspicuously absent from my birthings until the final hours of the last one.

Fingers faltering as she drew the fibers from her distaff—the unsteadiness bound to affect the evenness of her thread, I couldn't help noting with some satisfaction—Rachel replied, “The baby will be delivered on my knees. Don't you think the two of you can handle the birth and afterbirth?” Training her eyes downward on her whirling spindle, she added, “I know Abigail's too ill to come, but I'm willing to do whatever I can. And Hah should be able to tell us what to do, shouldn't she?”

That is how I learned that Rachel's plan to give Jacob a child through our Hah would irrevocably come to pass.

I don't know what demon possessed me along with that news, but I had not felt such bitterness toward Rachel since Jacob first told Father she was the one he hoped to make his bride. One afternoon when I found Reuben near the well, helping Hah stir a pot of red dye a safe distance from the younger boys' mischief-making, I sent him back to camp with a skin of water so I could ask her how she was feeling. The belt-cord over her cloak was riding higher, the only sign that her belly had started to swell.

“I'm fine,” she said, “just a little tired. I think this is ready now. Do you want to unravel while I stir?”

I picked up one of the half dozen skeins by her feet and started unwinding the yarn into the dye while she poked it under the surface with her stick. “No queasiness after you eat?” I asked. When she shook her head, I tried to look nothing but pleased. “That's fine,” I said, “just fine. But I didn't only mean that. How do *you feel* about bearing Jacob's child for Rachel?” I tried not to let sharpness mar my tone.

And it didn't mar hers. I might as well have been talking to the birdlike girl who followed Rachel around like a tame pigeon more than ten years before. "If I can make Rachel happy, I'll be happy," she said, and shrugged. "The child will be mine, too. How else could I give birth to an heir?"

How else, indeed. And how true it is that *a dark intention cloaks itself in light*. I half-convinced myself that my only concern was Hah's welfare. She was small-boned and small-hipped to be bearing a child, and I deplored Rachel's selfishness in exposing her to the danger of childbirth. Zilpah's hips, on the other hand, were wider than my own, so I released myself from any taint of selfishness as I wheedled Jacob on her behalf.

One evening he came into my tent for a few moments to watch the boys sleep, as he often did. "Seeing all four of them stretched out like that makes me feel rich," he would say. "Even though I'm still laboring for Laban, those boys remind me that the Mighty One is prospering me—just as He promised."

"Children are the greatest treasure in the world," I agreed, and meant it, though the sentiment also lent weight to my argument: I asked Jacob if he thought it fair that Zilpah should remain the only one among us not given the chance to bear a child. "For a woman," I said, "nothing compares to bringing flesh of your flesh into the world and holding that baby in your arms. Besides," I added my final thrust, "how can you so openly favor Hah over Zilpah? How will she hold her head up?"

Simeon, even in sleep unable to keep still for long, had twisted his blanket to one side and Jacob, after bending to stroke the bottom of a protruding foot, covered him again. "Has Zilpah told you she wants this?" he asked.

“You know Zilpah,” I replied. “She never wants to be a bother. But things don’t have to be spoken in so many words.”

And Zilpah said little when I told her that Jacob would go in to her, and we would pour out offerings of oil and grain to Nintur the Mother and Tammuz the Quickener that she might conceive and bear a child on my knees and increase the house of Jacob, according to the promise of the Most High.

Rachel had little to say to me either. I suppose I can’t really blame her. Whatever joy she found in Dan, the wide-eyed owl of a baby Hah brought forth at the beginning of the olive harvest had to have been diminished by the hardy little fellow Zilpah presented to me by the time the winter rains were over and the sheep sheared. Gad was the biggest baby any of us had ever seen. And strong—why, he still hasn’t been sick a day in his life. But perhaps that’s because Zilpah and I agreed to name him after the god of good fortune. The gods must have been pleased with us because they gave both Hah and Zilpah two sons each, before Jacob said enough was enough.

“Why does your god hate me?” Rachel had begged him to answer, when, once again, after years of being barren among her fruitful sisters, she found her belly rounding with child, only to have the unformed baby swept away. “How can I appease this God of the High Place? Has he no image I can adorn with fine cloth?”

Then I think Jacob realized what the rest of us understood—that no matter how many children were born on her knees, Rachel would not be content until she cried aloud with birth-pangs of her own. Watching each of her sisters succeed at giving Jacob children only increased her torment, though she had even less reason to be jealous of Hah and Zilpah than she did of me. I never saw Jacob treat either of them with more or less

than the polite attention he had given them since they were children. Truth be told, I think he felt uncomfortable taking them as concubines, and one day he finally declared that he would know them no longer as wives. What he said was: “The Almighty has blessed each of you with two fine sons—as many as my mother bore my father, an auspicious number—and the lots say we should leave it at that.”

Neither Hah nor Zilpah seemed to mind their status changing once again. Though Hah would have plucked each hair from her head to make Rachel happy, she must have seen that while Rachel was pleased to claim Dan and Naphtali as her own and made much of them—held them and cared for them and sang them songs along with Hah—she could not suckle them or sing to them in a voice more sweet than the one who had delivered them into the world with gasps and groanings. And always this knowledge lay between the two mothers. If Hah harbored any yearnings toward Jacob, she did not reveal them.

And who could be more loyal than Zilpah? She has always refused to say one word against Jacob—even when he moved us twice in one week to find better grazing or took the cloth we had woven for new robes and traded it for goats. Even the time Jacob beat Simeon and Levi with a shepherd’s rod for playing on El Shaddai’s altar—they were too young to know better—Zilpah never murmured a word against him. She rarely murmurs against anyone, for that matter. More than anyone I ever knew, Zilpah has been content to live the life allotted her. I don’t think she *needed* Jacob, but she cared for him in the same gentle way she cared for everyone. She had infinite patience with all our boys.

Perhaps the gods did hate Rachel. Perhaps she was so beautiful she made them envious. Or perhaps they simply pitied me. I had lain fallow since the birth of Judah and had come to accept that I would bear no more children—and I had no complaint, having already been blessed more abundantly than most women. But suddenly, unexpectedly, I found myself with a craving for green olives and sweet sycamore figs and realized that I had not bled with the moon for some time.

Issachar surprised us all, as bald as an egg the day he was born, and then Zebulun—both sweet, easy babies. And finally, wonder of wonders, Dinah. After Hah and Zilpah and I had borne Jacob ten fine sons between us, when we had all grown accustomed to the joy of welcoming boy children into the world—and the joyful woe of circumcisions on the eighth day—I drew one more babe from the waters of my womb. Just before evening, when the moon had risen like a round white cloud before the sun departed, I stepped upon the birthing bricks and, surrounded by all three of my sisters, brought forth a girl child with eyes wide as a dove's. Not just a daughter, but a gracefully-formed baby with skin like milk and wisps of hair the color of a red sunset who would grow to be more lovely than Hah, more beautiful even than Rachel herself.

\* \* \*

What can compare to those busy days of babies, those exhausting first years of children underfoot—all the needing, fighting, clinging, crying, burgeoning forth of life—when blessings or curses have yet to take hold in them? In those early, simpler days, every mother can imagine her child growing up prosperous and happy, untainted by shame, unvisited by calamity, unbeckoned by death.

Strong as I was, the births and tending of seven children, the years of work and weather took their toll. By the time Dinah came along, the days when I could still imagine Jacob choosing to lie with me out of desire for my smooth face and supple form had passed. Yet I hadn't paused to think about how thick I was becoming, how worn out I looked until I overheard Naphtali whining to Rachel one afternoon. Their tent-flap was raised so the cooler air could enter. "I'm hungry," he moaned. "Did we eat all the bread your mother made?"

The clacking of her loom ceased. "What?" she asked. "What mother?"

"*Your* mother," he repeated, sounding exasperated. "You know."

Rachel must have understood what he meant the same moment that I did.

"Naphtali," she insisted, "you know better than that. My mother died a long time ago. You're talking about Aunt Leah. Reuben and Simeon's mother. All the children's—except for you and Dan."

"Hah's mother?" Naphtali pressed, like a bird guarding an egg, determined to see it crack.

*So I look like an old woman, I thought. I don't care. Charm is deceptive and beauty fleeting. The only reason Rachel still looks like a morning blossom is because she's borne no fruit. Let her remain as beautiful as Ashtart, the goddess who conceives but does not bear. I wouldn't trade places with her for a storehouse of riches, not even for the love of Jacob.*

How could I have known that Rachel's days of fruitlessness were nearing an end?

This time, this third time that Jacob's seed took root in Rachel, Hah advised her to dream. "If you want the baby to cling to its life, spend as much time as you can dreaming the child into this world. Make the little one feel at home in the land of the living."

Rachel would have walked through fire, lived in a holy tree, shaved her head and buried the hair to give the newborn strength—as the Canaanites give strength to their dead—if she thought it would help her deliver a healthy child. She slept and slept the months away, gathering strength for her body and aid from the other world, the place of dreams. We hardly saw her except at mealtimes, and I silently (for the most part) fumed at the way she assumed the rest of us would be happy to shoulder her part of the grain-grinding, olive-pressing, wine-making, meal-cooking, clothes-washing, and minding of children.

The only task Rachel didn't avoid was her weaving. On warm afternoons she threw back the tent flap, and the click, clack of her loom echoed through the camp as she wove together the finest-spun yarns in the brightest colors that Hah could dye—kermes red, pomegranate yellow, indigo blue—into designs so beautiful they rivaled the work of the temple weavers at Haran. Rachel was creating cloth to wrap the infant she was bearing, that she would later use to make his first handsome cloak. She didn't say so, because why would anyone tempt the evil eye in such blatant fashion, but I suspected it was part of her plan to tempt the child to hold fast to this world.

Anyone watching Jacob might have thought this child was going to be his first. He doted on Rachel as if she were a new bride, bringing her presents as the hot season wore on and she puffed out like a fat pigeon. Clove nose-rings, gauze-like linen, sandals with thick wooden soles carved to fit her feet. And a gold amulet from Egypt engraved

with the likeness of Ishtar—to prevent evil spirits from stealing the child before he could breathe his first breath. When Rachel felt too ill in the mornings to leave her tent, he brought her sweet melon and mint tea with his own hands. Not for years had he been so thoughtless, so unheeding toward the rest of us. I told myself over and over that once the child was born, Rachel would need no more pampering, and our lives would resume their familiar pattern. This child would be a child like any other, would take his place among the other boys, would perhaps even be a girl—less lovely than my Dinah. I can't remember if I ever believed such nonsense.

How swiftly the days of our children fly by, like clouds rising from the west that refresh us with rain, only to vanish. While Rachel prepared to greet her first-born, mine was becoming a man. Already, Reuben was the age I had been when his father first arrived in Paddan-aram, and if truth be told, he had always seemed one of those children “born old,” but I still sighed at Jacob's announcement when it came.

We had just finished the evening meal, and before everyone dispersed, Jacob spit out the sprig of mint he was chewing and addressed Reuben in front of the other boys. “You have a good eye, Reuben. I've been watching you with the sheep. You've learned how to use the goats and dogs to keep them from wandering off.” Jacob squinted at Simeon, who was less than two years younger than Reuben but showed all the dependability of a sand lizard. “Paying attention is what it takes,” continued Jacob.

Reuben inclined his head at his father's praise, saying only “Thank you.” Then he straightened his shoulders in such a boyishly dignified way I wanted to smile and cry at the same time.

“I think you’re ready.” Jacob clapped one hand on his shoulder. “What about keeping the second watch on your own?”

“I am ready. Yes, Father.” His hand patted the polished bone knife-hilt at his belt. “I’ll get my staff and slingshot.” He broke away and headed for the tent.

“Don’t forget a water-skin,” I called after him, but I managed to stop myself before imploring him to “be watchful for your own safety as well as the sheep’s.”

If only that early enthusiasm for duties could last. Several hours remained before the second watch, but Reuben only slowed down long enough to accept some extra stones from Judah, who extended them with the wistful admiration nine-year-old boys reserve for brothers old enough to thrash them handily but also old enough to feel no need to do so.

“Watch out for lions,” Judah advised in a low voice, as if he were imparting a secret.

“He will,” said Hah. “He will.”

And so Reuben was out watching for lions when the rest of us gathered around the fire’s embers that night. The younger ones stretched out on their blankets, gradually falling asleep, except for Dinah, who dozed on my shoulder. But the older boys were definitely awake and still listening as Jacob recounted for the seventieth time the story of his God raining fire from heaven upon the wicked cities near the Salt Sea, Sodom and Gomorrah. That story always chilled my neck, but the boys couldn’t hear it enough. And though I used to doubt that two whole cities could be destroyed in a single day, I doubt no longer.

The night was not unpleasant, but I soon found myself wishing we had not let the fire dwindle. Usually, Jacob and I took turns as storytellers: he would tell family sagas and the stories of the Most High that Isaac, Rebekah, and his old nurse Deborah had repeated to him and his brother when they were small, and I would draw from the store of tales passed down by Father and Mother and old Abigail. So Rachel surprised us by announcing that she had something to tell us, something she could no longer keep to herself: a strange and wondrous dream had come to her again and again—for seven nights. If the firelight had been stronger, I would have seen the faces of Simeon, Levi, and Judah as Rachel described her dream-vision.

In the still air, her voice rang clear, almost like singing: “I could see myself great with child but floating high above the mountains and clothed with the sun. My feet rested on two clouds, the only two clouds in the sky, and my hair flew loose, lifting into wind. Suddenly, the sky grew dark.” Rachel’s words came faster, louder. No one interrupted her. “Lightning flashed, thunder rumbled, but no rain fell. Then, with one cry, I gave birth to a star—a star that grew bigger and brighter than the moon, brighter even than the sun that adorned me. And then it was night, and eleven stars shone in a circle around the star I had delivered. I heard voices raised in song, and one by one the eleven bowed down before the one, the greatest, the star in their midst shining brighter than the sun.”

How triumphant she sounded at the last. I shook my head at her foolhardiness—she had yet to give birth to a living child.

A round of silence greeted Rachel’s performance until Jacob spoke in the reverent tone he used before the altar of the Lord. “We will look for signs and wonders from this boy you carry, my Rachel. Signs and wonders.”

Simeon started coughing as if he had dust in his throat, and Levi struck him twice on the back. When Simeon caught his breath, the two of them rose without a word and headed toward our tent.

\*       \*       \*

How deep is the well of memory, as deep as the purposes of the human heart. Perhaps Hah's feelings for Jacob never ran strong because her feelings for Rachel rushed like storm waters, sweeping away everything in their path. What else could explain her unfailing efforts on behalf of a sister-mistress consumed with dreaming portentous dreams while she left the rest of us to the tasks of daily survival *and* left Hah to mother Dan and Naphtali, the sons Rachel had begged Jacob—and Hah—to provide her. I suppose Hah didn't mind tending the boys; they were flesh of her flesh, after all—and resembled her more and more the older they grew, both slightly built, with quick, birdlike eyes. Reuben seemed to enjoy acting the big brother to Dan and Naphtali, or "Hah-li" as he always called him, more than he did with my rowdy brood. But Hah should have been vexed by the way Rachel so easily forgot the boys—as if they were a pair of worn cloaks no longer able to keep her warm.

Yet, as Rachel's time drew near, Hah listened again and again as Rachel related the dreams that came to her while she slept the afternoons away. "Shall I comb your hair?" Hah would ask when Rachel awoke, and the two would sit just inside her tent, Rachel telling today's version of how her child was going to outshine brothers and father and all the other sons of mortals. Using the ivory comb Jacob had given Rachel as a wedding present, Hah would smooth and plait her hair and murmur encouragements. She saw to it that Rachel was never left alone. And who but Hah would have thrown locks of

her own children's hair and clippings from their fingernails into the fire to appease the demon Pashittu, to prevent him from stealing Rachel's child at birth as part of Enlil's portion?

When Hah pronounced that the baby could come at any time, Jacob gathered all of us, including the hired men and their wives, around the altar of unhewn stones he had built on the rocky ledge above the camp. Only Rachel—and Hah—did not make the climb. Jacob led a spotless young he-goat by a leather cord. Goats being leaders of the flock, they were the proper offering on behalf of a king. I clamped my lips together to keep from protesting. No sacrifices had been forthcoming for the other children until after they were born, and then a lamb had been sufficient. Why did Jacob think he needed to court the favor of the Most High by disregarding his family's feelings?

As we formed a half-circle around the altar, Jacob motioned for Reuben's assistance and handed him the goat's leading-cord. "Take off your shoes," Jacob commanded us, "and stand ready to serve the Lord." Then he approached the altar and raised his arms and lifted his voice, praising El Shaddai for being with him and blessing him in a strange land. "Remember your promise, O Lord, when you brought me safely from my father's tents to the house of Laban, my kinsman. Remember your promise to give me offspring like the dust of the earth, to bless me and keep me and abide with me always until you have brought me back to the land of my fathers." He bowed low before the altar, and signaled to Reuben to bring him the goat.

So it was Reuben who had to hold the squirming animal against the table of rock while Jacob laid his hands upon it for a long moment. Then, covering its eyes with one hand, he pulled the newly sharpened knife from his belt with the other, and slit its throat.

The life-blood of the goat as it poured down the altar must have called to the child in Rachel's womb. That very night I awakened to hushed, eager voices outside my tent and realized that Hah and Rachel had begun the early pacing necessary to hasten the babe's delivery. I lay still, knowing that hours would pass before I might be needed and fervently hoping that the children would keep to their pallets as well, but I needn't have worried. The younger ones—who might have been interested—slept on, soundly as bears in the wintertime.

However I might have resented Rachel and the unripe fruit of her womb in the months before her travail, even I was driven to pity by the dark of the next night when the babe had yet to show his face. Rachel's screams during the long day had driven Jacob to his knees in the dirt outside her tent. He was pulling the hairs from his beard when I finally appealed to him to think of the children. "You can do nothing for Rachel now," I advised him. "You might as well go out to the fields and busy yourself."

Fists clenching his beard, he only looked up at me, eyes slack with misery.

Summoning every pim-weight of compassion I could muster, I took his hands and drew him to his feet. "Jacob," I said, "Jacob."

The sound of his name must have reached him. His eyes narrowed and focused on me, but he still said nothing.

"If you want to help Rachel, go back to the altar of the Almighty and pray. Perhaps he's still hungry." It was all I could think of; I had learned that El Shaddai has an enormous appetite. "Take some bread and wine to offer him. Maybe some oil and honey." The God of Abraham and Isaac had already consumed a whole goat, unlike other gods who only demanded the entrails and kidneys, but who was I to understand the

hungers of gods? Giving Jacob something to do was the main point. I took his arm and headed him in the direction of the food supplies.

Zilpah kept three lamps replenished with oil during that long night. Reuben took charge of the children, only coming to get me when Dinah needed to be nursed, and Hah used all her skill to ease Rachel's agonies and hurry the baby along. But he was loath to leave his mother. I had never witnessed so much birth-blood, and even in the dim light, we could all see that Rachel's face shone pale as death, pale as the moon.

As the baskets and cushions and chests outside our rim of lamp-light slowly revealed their shapes in the faint light of morning, Zilpah and I draped Rachel's arms around our necks. Once more we supported her weight, helped her step onto the bricks, and squat. As her head fell against my shoulder, I remembered with aching heart how our lives had always run together, and how she had sung to the morning birds when she was small. "Stay with us, Rachel," I urged, "Just a while longer. Remember your dreams. The brightness—"

"No," she moaned, "I can't—"

"*Your* baby, Rachel. He's almost here."

I felt her arm tighten then as she gripped my shoulder, and heat rushed through me as she shuddered, uttered a weak cry, and fell back.

"Here it is!" cried Hah. "The head." And a moment later, her voice catching, she announced, "A son, Rachel. You've done it . . . a son. He's beautiful."

But of course, he wasn't. He was red and wrinkled, his head misshapen from the birth struggle—just like any other baby.

When I climbed to the high place to tell Jacob the news, sunlight was already piercing the scattered trees. He had fallen asleep sitting up, his back against one of the standing stones supporting the altar, his head drooping forward. Though I approached quietly, he started into wakefulness, the back of his head clunking stone while I was still a few paces away.

“Good tidings, Jacob,” I said, “another son.”

He moved not a handbreadth. “Rachel?”

“Weak, but I think she’ll be well. She’s named the baby ‘Joseph.’” I knew I should have waited to let Rachel tell him their child’s name, but I could not keep myself from blurting it out.

Jacob only nodded, though, a smile lighting his tired face as he pushed himself to his feet. “Joseph,” he said, drawing the name out as if to savor it. “Just as we planned. Is he strong?”

“He’s fine.” Even as I clipped the words, I could feel myself being dislodged from some small space in Jacob’s heart. I dreaded returning to camp with him and finding everything changed. And what a cruel injustice: all my years of hoping to win a greater portion of Jacob’s love by bearing him the heirs El Shaddai had promised, and it was Rachel who forever sealed her pride of place by giving him this one beloved, dream-begotten boy.

### 3.

No matter how long Jacob dwelt with us in the regions of Paddan-aram, he never thought of it as home. “The River Jordan is a muddy stream,” he would admit, “compared to the Euphrates and the Balikh, but it’s the one that winds through my

memory.” And yet, by the time Joseph was born, seven years had already passed since the *mohar* for Rachel had been paid, since Jacob had completed his bond of service to our father.

In those seven years, the numbers of goats and sheep in Jacob’s care doubled—a tribute to vigilant tending, fine weather, and, he always insisted, the favor of his fathers’ God. To find this favor, we moved farther and farther into the wilderness in search of grazing and farther and farther from our Father’s house. Not only did Alep and Uman marry and pitch their tents with us, glad to be bound to lucky Jacob instead of stingy Laban, every year or two we seemed to add another herdsman, and in time their wives and children would swell our number into a substantial household.

Jacob shrewdly advised Father to trade the less hardy sheep for cattle—a plan that both strengthened the remaining flocks and eventually provided a new source of increase, though cattle-raising required more diligence and time, not to mention water. Fortunately, my Reuben proved a strong right arm to his father from an early age. Perhaps I boast of him, but he was always such a clever, helpful child, and once Joseph was born, his father hardly seemed to notice.

When Rachel recovered from the dream-child’s birth and Jacob’s seven-year pact with Father reached its end, Jacob again announced his intention to return home. Again the two men danced their dance.

“Jacob, Jacob,” Father pleaded. Lowering his head, he slowly wagged it from side to side before peering up through squinted eyes. “The very thought of you leaving makes me feel like an olive tree beaten for its last olive.” He lowered his voice. “The *teraphim* have told me a secret: We prosper together, you and I. Together.”

“The God of my fathers prospers me,” Jacob answered, “wherever I go. Both me and my offspring. Remember my dream of heaven’s stair?” Fingering his beard, Jacob let his eyes take on a wistful softness. “How I long to see my father’s face . . .”

He did desire to see his father again to make peace between them, and he would have been comforted to embrace his mother once more, but I wonder if Jacob didn’t feel in his bones the sad truth we later discovered: that even before the fourteen years’ *mohar* to Laban was fulfilled, Rebekah had whispered her final blessing on the name of her favorite son—and gone down to the dead.

Ah, well, however much he desired to see his parents, Jacob was not yet ready to face his brother, Esau, so perhaps that explains why Jacob let himself be persuaded to stay in Laban’s service a while longer. But this time he insisted on his own peculiar terms, intent on proving to Father—and everyone else—that every mina of Laban’s improved fortunes could be laid at his feet. And the feet of El Shaddai. “All I ask for my portion,” Jacob said, “starting with the next breeding season, are the flocks’ speckled, spotted, and black lambs; the striped kids; and mottled heifers. That should make simple the accounting between us, Uncle.”

And though he coughed quickly to disguise it, I saw the beginnings of a smile on Father’s face at such a preposterous bargain. Everyone knew how few creatures were born with such markings. *What could Jacob be thinking?*

It became the stuff of stories how, from that day forward, Laban’s flocks began to bear black lambs and striped kids. The most outrageous version I heard, and my favorite, which Judah enjoyed repeating to me after his first trip to the sheep-shearing festival in Haran, describes how Jacob the magician instructed all his shepherds to hold dark almond

branches or poplar rods peeled in streaks before the rutting animals' eyes—to make them produce young with the same markings. Such nonsense. What I remember is Jacob stretching his right hand toward heaven time and time again and reminding us all: “We have the God of Abraham to thank. The Lord is with us as he promised.”

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Seven years: from Jacob's arrival at our Father's house to his weddings with Rachel and me. Seven years: from the wedding feast till the second *mohar* was paid. Seven years: from Jacob's agreement to labor for Laban until Rachel's Joseph was born. Seven years: of laboring for Laban while breeding the speckled and spotted young. And we might have completed seven more years of dealings with Father, but the winds changed and buffeted us elsewhere.

When Father realized that against every expectation—and perhaps even the predictions of his household gods—Jacob was besting him in the breeding battle, he started grumbling. He must have hated being a laughingstock in the village almost as much as he hated losing what he considered to be his rightful property. And when he heard his name being bandied about as far as Haran, the sourness must have set his teeth on edge.

“I will take the spotted and speckled young as *my* portion,” Father insisted after seven years of watching Jacob's profits far exceed his own.

Jacob held up open palms, feigning surprise at Father's demand. He had suggested that they simply renew their agreement, which was “working so well, isn't it?” But he bowed graciously. “As you wish,” Jacob conceded, a smile playing over his face.

And the following spring, he smiled again—when the lambs were born white, the kids grey or brown, and only the cattle produced a few mottled heifers. Rachel sang—at her spinning, her weaving, morning and evening.

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Joseph was the last child born in our tents in Paddan-aram. From the time he was an infant, Jacob would sweep him up and perch him on his shoulders, plant kisses on his cheeks, talk to him as if he were a revered advisor. And Rachel sewed him more cloaks and tunics than anyone, even Jacob, owned—always from the finest, most colorful cloth. If the boys grumbled about Joseph getting special treatment—“Why does *he* get a walnut slingshot *and* an inlaid bow? He’s only seven years old”—I would tell them: “That’s exactly why: he’s the baby, he’s only seven years old.” But I knew in my bones we were sowing nettles that would one day yield their harvest.

While he toddled around the camp, Joseph’s wide-eyed assumption that everyone lived to praise him made us laugh. Why wouldn’t we want to listen to his riddle, watch him turn a somersault or hop on one foot? He was a handsome boy, though somewhat small for his age: shining black hair, Rachel’s delicate bones in his face. Seeing Dinah, hardly more than a year older, leading him around by the hand and trying to mother him always made me pause to admire the two of them, especially when, from time to time, she would stop whatever they were doing, press both her hands to his cheeks and plant a single, loud kiss on one of his eyes or the side of his nose.

No doubt it was Dinah’s attachment to Joseph and perhaps her prettiness as well that endeared her to Rachel. Once she was old enough to walk around by herself, whenever I needed to look for Dinah, I could find her in my sister’s tent. Rachel would

give her trinkets from among her belongings—a bronze bracelet, silver earrings, an ivory needle; offer to plait her hair; teach songs to her and Joseph; and, later, share with my Dinah her secrets for weaving artful cloth.

I would be lying if I denied resenting the way Rachel lured Dinah away from me. My only daughter. But then, after what happened, I was glad to have an ally, glad to have someone else who cared enough about Dinah to hold her and weep with her.

*Rachel, Rachel, how will we manage without you?*

As Joseph grew, his appearance matured into striking good looks—even features, piercing eyes, strong limbs—but he passed the winsome stage that had distracted his brothers from their envy, especially once he started describing his dreams about all of nature bowing down to him. I have to blame Jacob for not stepping in the first time he heard Joseph relating how the rams of the flock had bent their horns to the dust or the wildflowers on the mountainside had sprung up at his passing. Jacob, of all people, should have known how brothers would respond to such provocation. He knew how things were between him and Esau.

Issachar and, especially, my Zebulun, who was closest to Joseph in age and *had* been Jacob’s favorite, couldn’t resist picking on Joseph when they thought their father wouldn’t catch them. “Dreamer, dreamer,” they would taunt, “dream about this,” and then jab him on either side with their elbows before running off in opposite directions. Or one of them would “accidentally” drop all his slingstones on Joseph’s feet or throw a dung cake in his lap and say, “Looks like everything wants to bow down to you, dream-brother.”

To his credit, Joseph never went whining to his father about their treatment—but Rachel did. And unlike all the other times, when Jacob insisted on letting the boys fight their way to a resolution, he stepped in and warned the older ones: “You should be ashamed. Joseph is younger than all of you, and I’m telling you: When the strong oppose the weak, it offends the Almighty.” Then, as if that scolding wasn’t enough to stir their anger, he placed his hand on Joseph’s shoulder and said, “He who slights Joseph, slights me.”

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When children are young, we worry about what might happen to them—how they might catch a fever; meet with some accident—snake bite, lightning strike, a fall from a high place; or be waylaid by thieves when they travel to the city. But as they grow older, we face a more terrible worry: what if I have raised a child whose heart is stone? what if he has no pity for the weak? what if he destroys the innocent?

Sometimes young men yearn after a life different from the one laid out for them. The way of herders can be harsh and lonely, and the never settling in one place must make it hard for some to feel attached to anything. That is how it seems with Simeon and Levi. After all, except for three or four exchanges a year with Father that required a day in the village, the only time our boys saw more than the others in our camp, the livestock, and the wilderness was when we traveled to Haran each spring for the sheep-shearing festival. Some men rebel against such loneliness. I suppose I still try to make excuses for Simeon, but I cannot bear for there to be no excuse.

Joseph witnessing the incident only made it a darker blot against Simeon. But after the day’s labors, of course Joseph was the one Jacob took with him to the high

place, to the High One's altar. On their way back to camp, they heard muffled cries coming from the milk-goats' pen. Alep's daughter Seila, hardly more than a girl, lay on her back in the dirt, her skirts pushed up, Simeon covering her.

Bellowing so everyone in the camp could hear, Jacob clutched Simeon's arm and shoulder, threw him to the ground and kicked him. "You piece of dung, you filth!" he cried as he beat Simeon with his staff. I doubt if Simeon realized what a mercy it was for all of us that he had not had time to complete his assault on the girl. Poor child. And poor Alep.

Simeon didn't show his face for days. I never did hear his side of the story. I would have liked to believe there was one, but it's harder now. I've had to accept that the son I held to my breast, sang lullabies to, and taught to tie his own sandals is a man I do not know, a man capable of . . . anything.

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What happens to us as time passes? What has happened to me? The young girl whose bones stretched and flisked through the world like a gazelle's, whose silent eyes watched her mother's linen-draped body buried beneath a broom tree; the bossy older sister, small taskmaster of her father's household; even the new wife whose husband crushed her heart to bleeding: they all seem like people I used to know and be fond of, like children whose gladness and sorrows I have felt *almost* as my own—but not entirely. If I have traveled so far from these younger selves of mine, how can I ever find my way back to the man Laban used to be? I only knew him as my father. In the days when he shared the sweet and bitter fruits of life with my mother, was this husband-of-one-wife gruff or tender, lazy or diligent, selfish or kind?

I've often regretted how little I recall before the calamity of my mother's death. And yet, a few memories stay with me like polished stones. Perhaps the earliest springs from a moon-filled summer night so long ago that I still had my first teeth and Rachel was too young yet to sleep away from mother's breast. Frightened awake by an evil dream and then alarmed by the yawning shadows waiting to swallow me, I crept from my pallet and cowered in the thrumming silence, my back pressed to the wall. When hungry grunts erupted from a chill-breathing demon—what I later realized was Abigail snoring beneath the open window—I stumbled as if blind, my arms outstretched to keep from bumping into walls, until my fingers caught the rough wool of Father's robe.

In the doorway to the courtyard, he hoisted me into his arms. "What's this?" he asked. "A little bat flying around in the dark?"

I was too frightened to speak and clung to his neck like a yoke pinned to an ox.

"Shh," hushed Mother, coming in from the courtyard, a limp bundle resting on her shoulder. "You'll wake Rachel," she whispered, "and I need sleep. I'm taking this one back to bed."

"Leah, Leah, precious little cow," Father chanted in my ear as he carried me outside. "What's the matter with my big girl?"

"I-I don't know," I answered at last, unable to form my fear into words. The starry dome of heaven stretched above us, cloudless and immense.

"Well, then, my little heifer," he started to bend over, hands gripping my sides as if ready to set me down, but I clutched his neck tighter.

"No, Papa, no," I whined.

“It’s all right,” he cajoled, squatting to make my feet touch the floor and prying my arms from their stranglehold. “See, I’m right here, and you’re such a big girl. You don’t need Papa to carry you.”

Though I can still feel my small body’s distress at being severed from his sturdy warmth, I understood the futility of arguing with adult thinking and mutely grasped the single hand he offered me.

“Come on, little Leah, let me show you what I do when I can’t sleep.” He drew me across the courtyard to the stairs; the crescent moon offered just enough brightness to remind us where they were. As we started to climb, he clasped my hand, and with my other palm, I pressed the wall at each step.

After weeks without rain, the rush roof-mats crunched under our feet, but to my surprise, we didn’t stop and sit on any of these. Instead, Father led me to a niche in the north parapet-wall from which he retrieved the paunchy shape of a half-filled wineskin. Mother and Abigail had warned me against even touching the wall, but Father turned and sat on it, and lifted me up beside him. His feet stayed planted on the floor, but mine dangled a cubit above it. Teetering between thrill and fear, I held my breath until Father’s arm wrapped around me and drew me close.

The breeze having died, I felt more than comfortably warm already, but Father insisted a swallow or two of date wine was just what I needed: “It will warm you up and help you sleep.”

As the sweet heat spread through me, I felt emboldened to turn my head and peer down. Then I looked across to our neighbor’s roof. Our own being several cubits higher, the view from the parapet revealed almost the whole of the Terah household’s rooftop.

No one was up there, even sleeping, unless hidden in a corner by shadows, but the mere indistinct sight of our neighbors' unattended clusters of grapes and platters of figs left out to dry excited me strangely. "I like it here, Papa."

"Ah, hah," he said, "so you like to see things. Seeing makes you strong, little one. The gods see most of all."

"They do?" I asked. "What about eagles? Abigail told me that eagles can see better than anything. They can see a mouse from way up high in the sky."

After I passed the wineskin back to him, he agreed that eagles were mighty, even god-like creatures. "They do fly," he mused, "and they kill. Quick. No more warning than a rush of wings."

I squinted down toward the ground but doubted that I would be able to see a mouse even from the height of a rooftop.

"The way of the eagle in the sky—" Father rose and started to recite. "The wise man may not understand. The way of the eagle in the sky," he flapped one arm skyward, "leaves no trace—" His voice trailed off and he sat back down. Then he pointed to the moon with splayed fingers. "Sin the Bull sees everything. Ev-er-y-thing. But what you want to remember is—" Father looked back down at me—"when he shines his Laban-white horns in the sky, we can see him, too. It's the god you can't see that you have to worry about."

This talk about worry and gods made me uneasy. Mother always said the gods would be kind if we showed them respect, just like anyone else. I started to hope that Father would quit saying strange things. Suddenly, he swayed backwards with a frightening limpness. Had he forgotten where we were?

“Selah,” he spat as he jerked forward. “Time to hop down.” He handed me the now-empty skin, grabbed my waist, and swept me from the parapet as he himself stood up.

I promptly slid my back down the solid wall, sat and leaned against it in relief. But after a moment, the question came to me unbidden: “Can we see what it is that Lord Sin *does* up there in the sky?”

Father squatted beside me, hands on his knees, then lowered himself the rest of the way to the floor. For a long time before answering, he stared upward. My eyes were having a hard time staying open. “I’d say the White One is busy with stars tonight,” he finally said. “Who can even count the stars?”

Indeed. With effort, I widened my eyes for a moment or two in a feeble attempt to number the twinkles that kept blurring into one another. “I can’t do it,” I fretted, as I felt myself leaning into Father’s side.

“Don’t worry, little cow,” he mumbled. “Nothing will sneak up on you tonight.”

\* \* \*

Father wanted something from us. “My two cubs should learn shepherding, how to tend livestock in the wilderness,” he proposed when his sons reached that unruly age of almost-manhood. I groaned at the thought, but hospitality must be given where it is asked, so we made room for them—Abram, the older twin, still runt-sized, chin as hairless as a girl’s; and Nahor, a handbreadth shorter than Father, but a sturdy young man, who reminded me very much of Father in his younger days.

I hadn’t been home more than twice in three years, but according to Jacob, Tana’at had waned to a shade of a shade, so I was surprised she could bear parting with

her boys—unless they were more wayward than Father had led us to believe, a possibility that troubled me. On the other hand, I suppose partings are as much a part of life as death itself, and Father probably didn't consider Tana'at's feelings, anyway. As usual, he had his own schemes to think about.

Abram and Nahor fit in easily at first, like goats with sheep, more agreeable and hard-working than I had imagined. Father sent them to us after the wheat and barley sowing, intending for them to stay until he needed them for the spring harvest. Although bidden to learn about herding, they both volunteered to help plant our vegetable garden; Nahor showed Gad and Asher, who were in charge of the garden that year, how to mound up the soil to make the roots spread faster and the plants yield their produce earlier in the season.

Years before, as our sons increased in number and size, we had added an extra tent to accommodate them all. But on most nights, six or seven of them would be out with the livestock, sleeping in the watch-place. As the numbers—and renown—of Jacob's flocks and herds had grown, so had the threats against them. In addition to wild beasts, two-legged predators posed an increasing hazard, and a close watch required many eyes. I noticed in passing that Abram and Nahor rarely slept in the same place. If Nahor slept in the camp, Abram slept with the flocks. Fleetingly, I wondered if there might be bad blood between them, but I didn't give it much thought.

Dinah said she didn't like the way Abram looked at her when she handed him his bread and curds or a bowl of beans. "He watches me the way an eagle watches a mouse," she said. "It chills my neck." But not being gifted with powers of divination myself, I

didn't pay much attention. It didn't occur to me that my daughter, perched on the gate of womanhood, might be gaining a heightened sense of things to come.

I don't know what it's like to dream the way Rachel did and Joseph does. When neither of them foisted their dreams or predictions on us for a while, I assumed they weren't having any, but perhaps they simply weren't telling them. Which is a wisdom it must be difficult to acquire. Otherwise, why would Joseph have chosen a morning when both Abram and Nahor were present to say over a loaf of bread and some raisins: "In the night I had a powerful dream."

None of his brothers reached for this dangling fig, but his uncles didn't know any better. Sure enough, one of them asked, "A dream? What was it? A portent of things to come?"

And so Joseph continued, "I dreamt that eleven spotted sheep stepped into a raging river, and when they came out on the other side, they were white as clouds. And a new white lamb followed them out of the river as well."

"Eleven spotted, but then they turned white? Is that what you said?" asked Nahor.

Joseph nodded. "And then two speckled goats stepped into the river after them, but they were swept away by the current."

"The goats didn't change color?" asked Abram. "What does that mean?" He leaned forward intently, his bread crushed in his fist.

"I'm not sure," said Joseph, "I'll have to ponder it."

Reuben, sitting next to Joseph, slapped him on the back. “No cows, no stars, not so much as an olive tree bowing down? That *is* a puzzle.” Then he rose and, brushing his hands together, added, “We have sheep and cattle to tend. Our brothers await us.”

They all trudged out to the fields that day and it was Judah who reported to Jacob and me what happened: how Abram and Nahor kept pressing Joseph about his dream and what it meant, asked him if he’d had other dreams, told him he must be a friend of the gods; how they had taken along a wineskin and kept passing it to him all afternoon; how, when the rains started, they all drove the flocks up into the rocks and caves for cover, scattering in groups to find shelter themselves; and when the wind picked up and drove Judah and Issachar out from under their ledge of rock, the two of them came upon Joseph, Abram, and Nahor in a shallow cave. Joseph was sitting, more than half-drunk, pinned against the rock-wall by Nahor while Abram, holding the wineskin, knelt beside him and prodded: “How does your father know how the sheep will breed? Do you tell him? How does it work?”

“What are you—” Issachar knocked the wineskin from Abram’s hand, but Judah grabbed his arm and held him back.

“What’s going on here?” Judah asked, keeping his voice more curious than accusing.

Nahor patted Joseph’s cheek, sat back, and shrugged. “We wanted to hear more about his dreams. The priests of Sin have dreams, you know, about the future.”

“Joseph’s no priest, are you?” said Judah. “Our father worships El Shaddai, not Sin.”

So that is how we discovered that my father had sent Abram and Nahor to us as spies. He wanted to learn Jacob's trick for predicting the breeding of speckled, spotted, and solid-hued lambs. Father could never have believed what I do: that there was no trick, only a mystery—Father's bad luck, Jacob's good luck. Jacob is the only one who thinks the luck was a trick of his god. A strange god, from what I have seen.

After Jacob praised Judah for his prudent handling of Abram and Nahor—"We do owe them hospitality, after all"—he asked Judah to continue acting toward his uncles as if nothing had happened. Then he pulled Issachar and Joseph aside separately and spoke to each of them. We didn't hear any more of Joseph's dreams for awhile.

We didn't have Abram and Nahor with us much longer, either. Just as the winter rains were ending, Laban sent word that Tana'at was dead, and the boys should come home to bury their mother.

\* \* \*

It had finally happened. After all his years in Paddan-aram, Jacob was ready to leave, to return to the land of his fathers. If Isaac and Rebekah were still alive, he would see them and show them their twelve grandchildren, the living proof of El Shaddai's favor. And he would seek a pledge of peace from the brother he had wronged and fled from so long ago.

Now that I was past the time for child-bearing, Jacob actually slept with me more often than in the old, urgent days. Sometimes we can only grasp our warmest desires when they cool. One night after a slow coupling that honored what we had become to one another, Jacob held me with my back against his chest. "Why now?" I asked. "What made you decide that now is the time to go back?"

He fingered my elbow and didn't immediately answer. "I've had dreams, Leah," he finally said, his voice subdued. "And some of the bondsmen have heard talk. From Laban's men." Jacob turned over on his back and sighed. "I'm afraid he's turning into a real enemy. The Abram and Nahor ruse was only the salt in the stew."

"What kind of dreams?" I asked. Except for the heaven's-stair dream when he was running away from Canaan all those years ago, Jacob never mentioned dreaming. I thought we were alike that way: we slept without dreams.

"Different ones." He wiped his hands across his face. "But they're all alike. I can see my father's tent and the red hills."

The days when I might have pressed him to tell me more were past. "I wonder what the boys will think of Canaan," I said. Growing drowsy, I added, "Dinah, too."

\* \* \*

Not knowing the depth of Father's rancor against us, Jacob thought it best that we depart without telling him: no need for argument about whether we should stay or go *or* what portion of the livestock we were entitled to take with us. To each of the bondsmen Jacob gave the choice of accompanying us or staying where they were, and those who stayed could either try their own luck or seek a place with Laban. Only Alep and his family decided to remain in Paddan-aram. In consideration of Alep's faithful service—and the insult his daughter had suffered at Simeon's hands—Jacob cancelled his bond and left him with his own flock of twenty sheep and seven goats.

To avoid actually cheating Father—though Jacob knew it would be impossible to escape Laban's *claims* of being cheated—we planned our departure to coincide with the spring sheep-shearing festival, which Father and almost every other sheep-owner within a

few days' journey of Haran would be attending. After celebrating a day or two and dividing the profits from the shorn wool with Father, we would barter some of our sheep for extra donkeys and supplies and leave Haran. But instead of returning to the old camp or finding a new place to pitch the tents, we would keep journeying south across the Euphrates. Alep and his family, along with two hired men from Haran, would guard Father's flocks for him until he came looking for them. With any luck, we might have been gone seven days or more by the time that happened. Father was certain to stay for the entire week of the festival; he would not want to miss the ritual of Tammuz and Ishtar's wedding. No doubt he would be presenting an even grander wedding gift this year to the Shepherd Tammuz in hopes of enticing the young god to quicken his sheep with many young—speckled and spotted young.

We had woven an intricate departure scheme, worthy of Father himself.

And then Rachel asked if we might include one more detail. I think all of us realized that, once we left Paddan-aram, we would never return, and even when one is eager to leave a place, that thought carries a sobering weight. Memory weaves an unseen cord, but a strong one. It is true that the people we cared most about and the tents we were accustomed to would journey with us into Canaan, but the house that Rachel, Hah, Zilpah, and I had grown up in would not. And yet, on our way south, we would be passing within a bowshot of the village in Paddan-aram.

"Jacob," pleaded Rachel, before we set out, "I need to stand one more time in the courtyard that was my mother's and walk through the rooms of my girlhood." She had been wrapping sackcloth around a bundle of Joseph's clothes to protect them in case of rain and tied them to the back of her donkey. After running her fingers along Jacob's

cheek and letting them rest on his beard for a moment, she added, “One more time I’d like to climb the steps to the roof where you used to dream of me; one more time I’d like to look out over the town.”

When could Jacob ever deny Rachel anything?

\* \* \*

We were too large a company, with too many animals, to journey with haste. But after seven days, we had traveled as far as the rocky foothills of Gilead with no sign of Father. And each day, the likelihood that he would trouble himself to follow us farther and farther into unknown country lessened.

So, on the eighth morning, when Joseph climbed down from his watch-place cresting the hill behind us and announced that he thought he saw someone—as many as a dozen men on donkeys—moving swiftly toward us, we did not immediately assume it was Father. Jacob sent Reuben and Judah to find out, warning them to be cautious about showing themselves if the men looked suspicious. A band of robbers might as willingly slay them for their donkeys as greet them with a shout.

Actually, Father had brought only a half dozen men with him, including Abram and Nahor. And he insisted the men were just for his protection in this wild, unknown country. “But you, Jacob, a son to me, to run off like a thief in the night. Carrying my daughters and grandchildren off like so much plunder. You should be ashamed.” Father had waited until he and his men sated themselves on our parched grain and pressed figs before upbraiding his run-away son-in-law.

Jacob merely shrugged. “My god, El Shaddai, told me it was time to go. Time to return to my own father’s tents.”

“El Shaddai told me,” Laban repeated grandly, “time to go.” He raised his hands in mock surrender of the point. Then, suddenly, his voice carried a sharper edge. “This god of yours doesn’t like me very much, does he?”

“I don’t know how the Almighty One regards you,” said Jacob, keeping an even tone. “He prospered us together for many years, *and*—” Jacob continued more pointedly, “I see no reason for there to be bad blood between us, Uncle.”

Father slapped his hands on his knees and stood up. Nahor and Abram rose on either side of him. “You’ve been cheating me for years with some kind of trick, some kind of charm to make the lambs and goats breed in your favor. And now this.” Father spat on the ground and took a step toward Jacob. “He runs off like a thief in the night because he *is* a thief in the night.”

Jacob remained perfectly still and said in a voice of deadly calm, “I have nothing that belongs to you, Laban. Nothing.”

By this time we were all standing, eyes fixed on Jacob and Laban, except for Rachel, who, stubborn to the last, had claimed she had no desire to see Father when he first rode into the camp and stayed in her tent.

Father extended his arms to include everyone in his pronouncement: “I ask you all to judge between us. This *Jacob* has stolen my household gods. I demand their return *and* a recompense of fifty sheep.”

Jacob flinched at the accusation. He must have been wondering what trick Laban was trying to pull this time. “I did *not* steal your household gods. What use would I have for your pitiful gods when I serve the Most High?” No doubt intending to emphasize the truth of his denial, Jacob swept his arms to indicate the entire gathering and announced,

“I have nothing to hide. Search the entire camp if you like. If anyone here holds your household gods in his possession, he will be put to death.”

We all drew in a loud breath. And then Father, his sons, and the men he brought with him began to rifle through all our belongings.

All I could think about was how absurd this upheaval was and how much trouble it was going to be to pack everything again. Abram and Nahor tossed sacks of grain, lamps, pots and clothes around as if they enjoyed making a mess of things. “Be careful,” I kept pleading as I followed around behind them.

Apparently unaffected by the furor around her, Rachel still did not emerge from her tent. It was the last one to be searched. Father himself went in to look around and there, cool as water, sat Rachel on her pallet, her cloak spread around her. “You must forgive me, Father,” she sighed, “I’m suffering from my woman’s time and cannot rise to greet you.”

Perhaps embarrassed, perhaps tired, or perhaps still able to be charmed by Rachel’s prettiness—which never faded—Father glanced around the tent quickly, emptied a sack of spindle whorls and thread, and gave up.

Vindicated in the eyes of all present, Jacob wisely decided to call Father’s accusation a misunderstanding. And Father wisely decided to start for home before I insisted that he and his men help us pack everything up again. But before they departed, Jacob and Father set up a standing stone to witness the promise they made to each other—that peace would prevail between them from this day forward.

*I hope that you are at peace, Father, but it's a peace without your household gods, isn't it? Clever Rachel was sitting on them in her tent the whole time, and none of us had any idea. She played the last trick on you. And it was a good one.*

\* \* \*

I wonder if sitting on those gods worked a charm for Rachel: she thought so, though now it seems a blessing mixed with a curse—as most blessings are, I suppose. We had pitched our camp near Hamath, along the bank of the Orontes, and no longer having any reason for haste on our southward journey, stayed for over a week, washing the clothes, letting the animals drink their fill, trading for wine and supplies in the town. One afternoon, I sat beneath a tarfa tree near the river, watching the water tug at the reeds along the bank, pleased to be doing nothing when Rachel came and sank down beside me.

“Rachel,” I said, too relaxed to bother looking at her, “who would have thought when we were children squabbling in Father’s courtyard that we would end up traveling the world in a tent. I feel full of days.”

But Rachel had not come down to the river to rest. Before she finished a word, the trembling of her voice told me she had important news. “Leah,” she said, grasping my knee, “I’m going to have a baby.”

\* \* \*

The hills *were* red. Almost the color of Dinah’s hair. And Esau’s, said Jacob. When we crossed the Wadi Yarmuk, he sent out messengers in search of his older brother’s tents. I can only shake my head at the thought of how many years Jacob spent in fear and trembling of Esau, dreading the day when the two of them must meet.

Finally, word reached us that Esau and a great band of his men had crossed the Jordan and were coming to meet us. “How many men?” Jacob asked the gangly boy who brought the news.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. A whole host of them. Two hundred?”

Jacob, the practiced schemer, clasped his hands in front of his chest and worked at devising a plan to turn away Esau’s wrath—the wrath that he deserved and thus expected. He decided to give his brother half of everything. The herdsmen could drive the animals ahead of us, and surely such a gift would soften his brother’s heart. Also, everyone should bow before Esau. He showed all the men how to prostrate themselves seven times as custom dictated for the most extravagant show of obeisance. And he would divide us into companies with enough distance between us so that if some should be slaughtered, the ones behind might escape. He actually tried to explain the order of our placement: “I’m going to put Rachel last—because of her condition. The baby.”

Did he think he fooled anyone?

Finally, Jacob prayed. Prostrating himself on the ground, he reminded the Almighty one more time: “You have promised to see me safely back to the land of my fathers. To make my offspring as numerous as the sands of the sea, the stars of the sky. Deliver me, O Lord, from the hand of my brother Esau.”

When at last the two brothers met, Esau charged forward like a red bear and swept Jacob up in his arms before he could fall to the ground. He roared a laugh, kissed Jacob on both cheeks, and said, “Welcome home, my brother. I thought I would never see you again.”

Jacob wept.

\* \* \*

Though still bright-faced and slender-limbed, Rachel was no longer a young woman, and she was growing round with child. Elated by her pregnancy, but worried for her well-being, Jacob decided that we would pitch our tents near Shechem until after the baby was born. The valley offered rich grazing land for the animals, and the rocky foothills provided numerous caves and places of shelter during bad weather. A bustling town, Shechem, well-situated on an important road leading north: its people and king prized the outsiders who were making their city rich.

And the king, Hamor, had a son, whose name was Shechem.

I still don't know how it happened, or why Dinah went down to the city alone. Whether she was willing or unwilling, taken by force or swept along on a stream of honeyed words. She was never able to talk about it afterwards. Only the men talked.

King Hamor probably thought he was showing honor to Jacob by the mere act of entering his tent. A wandering Aramean, a herder of sheep and goats. Certainly not the most desirable union his son could enter into, but the boy was sick with love and desperate to make this herder's daughter his wife. "Stay here, dwell among us," said King Hamor. "Your own sons are of an age to marry. Let them marry daughters of Shechem. And the daughters in your household, let them marry sons of Shechem. Trade with us, put down roots, prosper here."

Prince Shechem added, "Name whatever *mohar* you see fit. Your daughter is a treasure beyond counting—I will pay anything."

Jacob answered, “Our god, El Shaddai, demands that we be circumcised. And I know that is not your custom. But to marry with the daughters of my tents, the men of Shechem would have to be circumcized.”

Did Jacob think that would be the end of this suit for marriage? I think he had no idea what to do about Dinah and was stalling for time. Certainly, none of us expected what did happen—that all the men of Shechem would agree to follow the example of their prince and agree to have themselves cut on the same day.

Then came the act of darkness: While the men of Shechem lay weak and groaning, Simeon and Levi cut their throats.

\* \* \*

Jacob’s face turned to ash when the boys told him what they had done, bragging as if they had exacted some valorous revenge.

Trembling, too overcome to raise his voice, Jacob asked, “How could you? You have made us an abomination before God, before every person who hears of this thing.” He cried out. “We were supposed to be a blessing.”

\* \* \*

We pulled up our tents and ran. Searching for a way to be clean again. And poor Rachel ready to deliver her child any day.

At Bethel, the place where Jacob had, so long ago, laid his head upon the earth and dreamed of heaven, he thought he heard God speaking again. We must purge ourselves of any images, any semblances of other gods, and dedicate ourselves to El Shaddai alone. Every man, woman, and child in our company must do this. And then we

would be worthy to renew our covenant of blessing and take our new name: people of Israel.

Jacob was not himself when he proclaimed that any person holding back the smallest idol, image, or gold earring stamped with the likeness of another god would be put to death. Hadn't we had enough killing?

\* \* \*

I'm sure he could never have hurt you, Rachel, for holding onto this one small Asherah, this one small vestige of a god that might have helped you bring life into the world without losing your own. Who knows, perhaps it was the Asherah's power that saved the baby's life. He's a fine, strong boy—Benjamin. I know you wanted to call him Benoni, but Jacob has changed the name, just a little change, to hide him from the evil eye. Hah and Zilpah and I will take care of him. I promise. We will tell him stories about you, how beautiful you were, how loved. Maybe between us, we can raise your Benjamin to be a gentle man, like my Reuben. Here. I'm going to leave the Asherah for you, Rachel. *Peace be with you, sister. Peace to all you people of the graves. You go before us, and we follow.*

## BILHAH, JACOB'S CONCUBINE

*after being discovered in the arms of Reuben, his son*

Disgrace falls like rain  
in an open field—  
no place to shelter.

The kishkanu tree  
greening in Eridu  
covers it not.

He came to me  
when Nanna's moon  
sailed over the mountains.

And I clung to him  
like an apple to the bough,  
like dates to the date leaf.

I knew the wrong—  
that I belonged  
to his father.

What weary plea  
can wipe away  
my deep offense?

That his lips dripped honey,  
his mouth tasted sweet,  
his strong arms promised  
youth?

ZILPAH, WHO BORE JACOB TWO SONS  
FOR HER MISTRESS, LEAH

Zilpah—*small-nosed*. Who named me so?  
My slave-mother, whose stunted life-breaths  
were all she could bequeath?  
My father, whose nostrils drew free air,  
a scent he never meant for me?

I have tasted life but not known its savor,  
been heard as an echo, not as a voice.  
Seen and unseen, I always remain

Laban's issue, not claimed as his daughter;  
Leah's sister, not sharing her portion;  
Jacob's handmaid, not owned as his wife;  
mother of sons not counted as mine.

But these boys,  
these heirs to Jacob,  
they carry my breath wherever they go,  
and I speak their names as a blessing:

Gad—*good luck*;  
Asher—*good fortune*.

Manakhir kebira. Good breathing. Shalom.

RACHEL IN SHEOL,  
LAMENTED AND LAMENTING

Some say they can hear me weeping  
as I mourn the loss of my children,  
that I can never be comforted—  
but the voices they hear are their own.

Some say they can hear me crying  
in the cool, trembling shadows of twilight,  
for the outstretched arms of my Jacob,  
but the gray land has stopped up my mouth.

I cannot answer my husband,  
though he searches for me in the desert,  
though he calls out my name to the whirlwind,  
and watches for me by the wellspring.

He will not find me.

## LEAH AT LAST

In the cave near Mamre  
he buried me

beside his fathers and mothers,  
who listened to the Fear

in their bones and heard  
God promising life

sprinkled forth like stars  
or dust upon the earth

if they followed the Voice  
wherever it led.

In the cave near Mamre  
he buried me

beside Abraham and Sarah,  
Isaac and Rebekah,

whose bodies resting  
in the grave hear nothing

and have no need  
of stars or promises.

In the cave near Mamre  
he buried me

beside the place that awaits him  
when the world ceases

to hold him from me.  
I was the first to sleep

in Jacob's arms, and though  
he loved my sister

more, I have prevailed.  
While she lies alone

by the road to Ramah,  
I will welcome Jacob

to my deep, quiet bed  
and yearn for him no more.

## SHIPHRAH AND PUAH: MIDWIVES IN EGYPT

We refused to kill babies.  
Well, not refused exactly—failed—  
*said* we arrived too late to the labors  
of those hardy, headstrong Hebrew women,  
who popped out infants like they were ripe  
fruit—figs, maybe, or apricots,  
then hopped up and went right back to making  
bricks with no straw, bread with no yeast,  
love with no thought of reaping woe in nine months'  
time. “Who knows what happens to the babies?”  
we asked, our faces blank as papyrus scrolls.

So that is how Moses, his mother,  
the basket-boat, Egypt's daughter, ten plagues,  
and the freedom of a people happened.  
Because Pharaoh knew nothing about women.

## RAHAB'S APOLOGY

“Rahab, Rahab, let down your long hair,”  
the boys taunted me in the marketplace,  
and I the poor daughter damaged in the dark  
streets of a city that deserved to fall,  
left with no hope of a better life than trading  
entry to my body for a sheaf of wheat,  
a skein of wool, a pair of turtledoves,  
so when the two bearded strangers approached me  
as if I had something else to offer, yes,  
I hid them on our roof under stalks of drying flax  
when the King’s men came searching for spies,  
and I lied to the officers, sent them  
in the wrong direction, away from the limber  
young men I lowered down the rough face  
of the city wall—a scarlet cord flung  
from my window along with my promise  
of silence until the day they would return  
with the Ark of the Lord, a bevy of priests,  
and a host of soldiers prepared to appear  
ridiculous for the sake of leveling the town.

I may have been the only one in Jericho  
delighted to watch the Israelites  
circle the city seven days straight,  
voices hushed until that last morning  
they blew their horns and roared and the rotten  
wall crumbled into dust.

## JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER

*We will count the days with stones.*

Zebah points to a gnarled, stooping Tarfa tree rooted in the sandy slope of the opposite creek-bank. Its fluttering gray-green branches spill pink blossoms into the gurgling water. "Come and see," Zebah urges, with a trace of her old zest, so Sarah and I obligingly cast off our sandals, hoist our tunics to our knees, and wade into the cold water behind her.

One side of the twisted Tarfa trunk is hollowed out, and Zebah drops to her knees before it. She extends her palm to show us the smooth black pebble she has taken from the creek-bed. While Sarah and I stand in silence, Zebah bends to place the stone in the tree's hollow. "I will add one each morning. When we count sixty stones, it will be time to go back."

*Time to go back:* she says the words calmly. I can almost feel her numbness. Was it only yesterday she was dancing in the street with the rest of us—tambourines crashing, that long black hair flying out behind her, gold bracelets jangling on her wrists and ankles? Our soldiers were home, the Ammonites crushed. Children sang songs and old ones rose from their pallets.

With the whole village chanting "Jephthah, Jephthah," thronging in front of her house to welcome him back, why shouldn't she dance out to meet her own father? Why shouldn't she lead the women in singing praises to the Judge of Israel? Sarah followed right behind, strumming her lute as the crowd parted before them.

I wasn't watching when he first caught sight of her, but when he bellowed like a wounded ox, we all froze. Jephthah clutched his turban with both hands and uncovered his head slowly, as one unbinds a wound. The way his aides dropped back, they must have understood why. When he grabbed the hem of his purple cloak and started to rend it in two, even I knew to be afraid.

“You have brought me to ruin,” he said. As if she had anything to do with his monstrous vow. Promising as a burnt offering the first living thing to come out of his house—I still can't believe it. He bargained with God for the privilege of slaughtering Ammonites, and she must pay the price. Yes, we all wailed, and men poured dust on their heads. But Zebah is the one pledged to return in two months to have her throat cut.

#

“Can I help pitch the tent?” asks Zebah.

“No, no, we can manage.” Sarah blurts the words before I do. She's fifteen, two years older than Zebah, and already a widow. Eliab gave her no children, and her only brother-in-law is too young yet to cover her with the marriage cloak, so Sarah knows about waiting. I'm almost the same age as Zebah. Like her, I've never been married and still live in my father's house.

Sarah removes her headcloth, wipes her forehead with it, ties it firmly around her waist. “Zebah, why don't you sit over there in the shade and rest.” She points toward a pair of spindly acacia trees. “You can keep us company while we work.” As she hands me a mallet, Sarah motions toward the sackcloth bundles at the edge of the sandy area she has chosen for our tent site. “Rachel, see if we have enough tent pegs.” Without

waiting to see if either of us follows her directions, she squats and begins clearing away stones.

As we work, I try to think of something worth saying. Sarah and I are supposed to be helping Zebah make the most of these two months. This time in the mountains with us was all she asked. This time—instead of her bride-price. But there she sits in her small patch of shade, one hand absently tracing the dry, cracked earth while she stares at nothing. What can I possibly say? As we uncoil the tent-ropes, Sarah lifts her voice to chant the song of olive harvest, and I join in.

#

Soon after dawn, Zebah wades across to place the fifth stone in the Tarfa tree. She has asked to perform her small ritual alone, so Sarah remains in the tent, and even though I can't help watching, I stay on this side of the creek. Cradling the stone in her hands, she lifts it high and chants her prayer. Arms raised, she slowly turns three times, hoping to catch God's eye. Finally, she kneels and places the stone in the tree's hollow.

Last night as we lay by the fire, she told me she has decided to beg God to remember her and be pleased to stay her father's hand. In return, she is willing to do anything. "Do you think the One Who Is will hear me?" she asked.

"I would hear you, Zebah," is all I could say.

When she waves to me, I cross the stream, and we begin searching the bark of the largest Tarfa trees for manna-sap to boil for breakfast. I promised Sarah we would find some. Zebah hasn't had much of an appetite, and Sarah thinks the sweet manna might tempt her.

#

Two weeks have passed, and Zebah seems almost like her old self. Sarah worries that she's clinging to false hope, but I don't see what harm that can do.

This morning I've been gathering grass and sticks and building a fire while the two of them prepare the dough for wheat cakes. I'd never noticed much resemblance between Sarah and Zebah before, though I knew their mothers were sisters. Zebah has her father's wide forehead and thin lips. But now I see that she and Sarah have the same solid bodies, wide shoulders, efficient movements. I mention how they both stick their elbows out at the same angle while they're kneading, and pat the dough to the same rhythm, with their fingers instead of their palms.

"Why not?" asks Zebah, as she stops for a moment to observe her cousin. "When we were children, our mothers taught us together to make wheat cakes. At Sarah's house. Remember?"

"Oh, yes," nods Sarah. "We thought we were so grown up. Remember how good those first loaves tasted? And all that summer? We'd carry loaves outside to bake over night in the ashes—and beg to sleep on the roof so the smell would sweeten our dreams."

Suddenly, Zebah slaps a wheat cake down, and the flour under it billows.

Sarah laughs and wags a finger at her. "My mother used to pinch your ears for doing that, wasting good flour."

Zebah claps her hands to her ears, and we all smile.

#

Twenty-three stones in the Tarfa tree—and I wonder how it must feel to know you will never again see the world washed with winter rain or hear spring lambs bleating

from the hills. This afternoon the three of us are whiling away the heat of the day in a shallow cave I found on one of my fuel-gathering expeditions. I've surprised Sarah and Zebah by producing pomegranates for each of us. As we sit and savor the tangy fruit, I tell them stories.

Though I am young to be a teller of tales, I have a way of remembering things, a certain skill in recounting them—or so my neighbors in Mizpeh tell me. When the women gather to weave, they have started asking me to tell them stories and even repay me in cloth.

Today, as usual, I begin with the story of stories: baby Moses being saved by his mother and sister Miriam and a pharaoh's daughter—then the wondrous tales of Moses and Miriam and Aaron leading our people out of slavery in Egypt, through the desert, to the promised land.

At Sarah's request, I sing the Song of Deborah, though I avoid decorating the details of the woman Jael hammering a tent-peg through Sisera's head. That story has never been one of my favorites. But perhaps I needn't have worried about upsetting Zebah. As soon as my song ends, she leans toward me, one hand on my shoulder, her lips bright with pomegranate juice. “Do you remember an earlier story?” she asks. “About Abraham and Isaac?”

I think I know the one she means, and if she wants to hear it, if she wants to hope—“The binding of Isaac?”

Zebah nods and tightens her grip on my shoulder. “Tell it.”

“Under the dome of heaven in a time long past—” When I begin, she settles back. “Abraham the Canaanite heard God calling to him. And when Abraham answered,

the Lord of All commanded: ‘Take Isaac your son, the son of your old age, the son whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There, on a mountain I will show you, build me an altar of earth and unhewn stones. And there on the altar you shall offer me Isaac, the son whom you love, as a burnt offering.’”

Zebah interrupts. “But he didn’t--”

“That’s right,” I slowly answer. “According to the story, an angel spoke to Abraham and stayed his hand. God provided a ram for the sacrifice, so the boy was saved.”

Sarah pitches her pomegranate hull against the wall of the cave. “Is that what we are waiting for? A miracle?”

I take both of Zebah’s hands in mine. “I wish it could happen. Who knows?”

Sarah pushes herself to her feet. “That was a long time ago, and Isaac was a boy child.”

#

In the night, Zebah moans and tosses. By the time she finally gasps and sits up, I am wide awake, so I follow her when she lifts the tent flap and crawls outside. The colors of dawn have not yet touched the sky, but the darkness has lightened. We hug our blankets to us and move away from the tent, so we won’t wake Sarah.

“What is it?” I ask, as we sit and lean against the rocks of our makeshift oven. They carry no warmth.

“A terrible dream, Rachel, and it seemed so real.”

“Do you want to tell me?”

“I don't want it to be true,” she says, and briefly drops her forehead to her bent knees.

What can I do but sit with her and wish all of this *were* only a terrible dream? But the rocks shifting against my back pinch, and my scalp starts to itch. Tomorrow I'll have to wash my hair.

“It was Mizpeh,” begins Zebah, “and everything in the village was the same. Early morning. I was on my way to the well to draw water, and Dinah, our neighbor, met me on the path.” She pauses.

“And then what?” I ask.

Zebah clenches the corner of her blanket in both hands. “I greeted her, but Dinah acted like she didn't see me. When we reached the well, other women had gathered, and I greeted them also, but no one answered me. I raised my voice: ‘Rebekah, Ruth, Rahab—God be with you. Don't you see me? Don't you know me?’ They acted as if I wasn't there.”

I circle one arm around Zebah's shoulder.

“Then it was Sarah,” she says. “Sarah coming toward the well, so I ran to meet her. By this time, I was frantic, out of breath. ‘Sarah, Sarah, I'm so glad to see you!’ But she didn't know me either. I pleaded with her: ‘Sarah, don't you know me? I'm your cousin.’ But she didn't. She was *polite* to me. She held out her hands in greeting and said, ‘God be with you, sister. I believe you're a stranger here, but you are welcome to draw water from our well.’” Zebah's rush of words stops. After a moment, she murmurs, “Then the dream faded.”

She lets the weight of her body slump against me. What can I tell her? From the scattered trees behind us, faint twitters of birds mock me. “The dream isn’t true,” I finally say. “Whatever happens, Sarah and I won’t forget you. No one will.”

“What about my father?” Zebah turns and searches my face in the dim light. “Will he remember me? I’m his only child. Do you think he’ll have regrets?”

“Zebah, have you thought about running away?” I ask the question as if it is nothing. “Your father cannot want to keep this vow.”

“He’s a hard man,” she replies. “Not one to look back. Since my mother died five years ago, we have not spoken her name.” Zebah pushes herself to her feet. “My mother’s name was Abigail.”

#

There are thirty-five stones in the Tarfa tree. Our time is more than half spent. This morning Zebah asked Sarah and me to lead the women of the village back here when she is gone and invite them to keep a stone to remember her by. But still I wait for something to happen, for Jephthah to send word that he has recanted his vow or redeemed her by tribute—or will die in her place.

Though the days have been growing warmer, an unusual chill cuts the air tonight. We lie in our blankets, circling the fire.

“My feet are freezing,” says Sarah. “Is it all right if I bring out the last wineskin? We’re going to need more flour anyway; someone will have to go down for supplies.”

I suspect that “someone” will be me, but Sarah isn’t really asking permission. She’s already up and rummaging in the tent. Clutching the wine in one hand and her reed

pipe in the other, she returns, and after a few swallows, starts playing—lively, cheerful tunes.

Eventually, Zebah passes me the wineskin. She leans back on her elbows and stares in the direction of the fire. “Sarah’s the one for music, isn’t she?” Zebah muses. “You know, she can play any instrument. Tried to teach me the lyre once.”

“She has a gift.” An agreeable warmth spreads through me.

“My fingers were too clumsy. Know what she said?” Zebah mimics Sarah’s long-ago verdict on her lyre playing: “Learning the right touch for the strings is difficult for many people.”

“I can’t play the lyre,” I assure her. She doesn’t respond, and then I realize that tears are dripping down her cheeks.

“You tell stories,” she says, her voice wavering. “Everyone wants to hear you. Why was I born, Rachel?” She wipes her face. “To die? Did God make me to die?”

I sit up straight, and Sarah stops playing. The twigs crackle as they burn. “I don’t know, Zebah,” I say. “I don’t know anything.”

#

Fifty days have passed. This morning Zebah and I began our climb into the hills when the light was still too dim for shadows. She wants to keep going until exhaustion overtakes us, until her sinews ache, her breath is short, and rest will be pleasure. I’m lighter of foot and have learned where the worst thorn patches are, so I lead the way.

The birdsongs of daybreak have given way to the quiet heat of morning when we reach a flat stretch dotted with spindly grasses. I stoop to remove a sharp pebble wedged between my toes and sandal, and the sudden sound of a strange voice makes me start. A

male voice. Zebah and I stare at one another. The rich tones seem to come, yes, they rise from below us, not far to the west. I motion to her as I realize the voice is heading our way. We scramble toward a line of scraggly myrtle bushes and crouch behind them. Zebah points him out first—probably a bowshot away, a young shepherd strolling across the mountain, occasionally bouncing his club against the rocks. His tone cajoles. “Hey. Little sheep, little sheep. Hey. Come here, come here. Hey, little sheep. Where are you?”

Alone, he can only be searching for strays. He veers away from us at last, and Zebah stands to watch his tall, sturdy back retreating down the rocky path.

I wish we had seen his face. Without thinking, I grab Zebah’s arms and urge her, “Run after him. This could be your chance.”

For a moment, I see life in her eyes, but she presses her lips together and shakes her head. “You know I can’t,” she finally says.

#

On the fifty-third day I lie awake as first light slants through the parted tent flap. Far away a raven screams. Rain has fallen in the night. I heard it slapping the goat-hair roof as I lay awake in the dark—thinking and waiting. When Zebah finally throws back her blankets, dodges the hanging lamp, and climbs out of the tent, I listen until her footsteps are out of range. Then I push back my own blanket.

“Wake up, Sarah.” I bend over her. “Zebah’s gone down to the creek. I need to talk to you.”

Sarah’s eyes are still closed, but she says, “I’m awake.”

“I’ve got to do something. I can’t stand it any more. All this time.” I shake her arm. “Look at me, Sarah. We’ve been hoping someone would come for us. That he’d forsake the vow or be released from it. Or be struck dead.” I blow out a breath. “I’m going down to the village today and talk to him.”

Sarah sits up and sweeps the hair from her face. “You, Rachel, are going to talk to Jephthah, the Judge?”

“I’m going to talk to him. I’ll find a way to talk to the High Priest if I have to. But don’t tell Zebah where I’m going. Tell her—you wanted to make fig cakes. I’ve gone to find figs.”

#

As I reach the first of the flat-roofed houses, I pull my mantle over my head. Young children are already playing in the narrow streets—shrieking and splashing through puddles. After our time on the mountain, the smells of garbage and dung are strong.

I hope I will be early enough to catch Jephthah before he leaves his house, and sure enough, I hear him up on the roof, barking at the boys who are packing his roof after last night’s rain: “Don’t miss the corners! I don’t want any leaks.”

I wait in a doorway across the street until the boys scuttle down the stairs and dash off. One of them promptly slips and falls—splat—in the mud. His companion hoots, but grabs the downed boy’s hand and yanks him up. They walk away, bumping each other sideways and laughing.

When I slip up the stairs, I find him sitting on the ledge built into the west wall, as if he's been waiting for me. Sunlight heightens the deep grooves of his brown forehead. With one hand he strokes his wiry, untrimmed beard.

I uncover my head and stand before him, waiting for acknowledgement, but he says nothing. I keep waiting. In the face of his silence, I know he expects me to cringe and leave. But I cannot. Bowing my head slightly, I say in the steadiest voice I can muster: "The Lord be with you."

Jephthah grunts but still does not speak. He could knock me to the floor with one swat from his huge rough hands, but he doesn't do that either, so I gather my courage and continue.

"I've come on behalf of your daughter."

How can he sit there and say nothing?

"Her two months are almost over, and we must return soon, but I ask you— how can the blood of an innocent girl make an acceptable sacrifice to the One Who Is?"

Jephthah watches me with unblinking eyes. He takes a deep breath. "Did she send you?"

I wipe my sweating palms against my cloak. "She doesn't know I'm here. She wouldn't beg you for her own life. That's why I've come. I'm begging you. Is there no way to set aside your vow?"

"How can a man of honor set aside a vow he has made to God in the presence of witnesses?" He draws one fist to his chest and three times strikes his breast.

"But people will understand if you substitute another offering for your daughter. Surely God will also. Does the Law tell us that children should be sacrificed?"

“It is the vow of my mouth,” insists Jephthah, “the vow of my—” He slaps the ledge next to him with one hand.

I fall to my knees on the wet roof. “Have you talked to the High Priest? Have you asked him about this?”

Jephthah’s face turns to flint. “I am a Judge, a commander of armies. It is not my place to be consulting priests.” Jephthah stands and turns his back to me.

I know what I must do.

#

Pinhas the High Priest is seated in his chair by the doorpost of the Sanctuary. His white linen turban shines in the dim light.

I prostrate myself before the two pillars and start to pray in a low voice, but agitated, my face turning feverishly side to side, side to side, side to side. If I catch his attention, perhaps Pinhas will approach me. My knees and elbows ache, and my voice has dwindled to a rasp when I finally feel a hand on my shoulder.

“Peace be with you, daughter,” he says.

I almost weep.

He helps me rise, and I stand staring at the leather ephod which covers his chest. Its twelve precious stones gleam like eyes.

“Your heart seems troubled,” says Pinhas. “What do you ask of the Lord today?”

“Life for Jephthah’s daughter.”

Pinhas taps two fingers to his bearded chin. “You are one of her companions.”

“Yes,” I say. “I have been with Zebah on the mountain these two months, the only favor she asked of anyone. But for her to die seems—wrong. Isn’t it wrong? An improper sacrifice?” I clear my painful throat. “I’ve already spoken to her father.”

“He made a rash vow,” says Pinhas, as he fingers the stones of his ephod.

“Yes, he did.” I clasp my hands in front of me. “But surely there’s a way to release him from the vow and redeem his daughter. Can’t you help him?”

“Jephthah is a proud man,” says Pinhas. “If he wants to be released from his vow, he should come to me and ask.”

“He *is* a proud man.” I bow my head. “Perhaps you would consider going to him—or sending a message?”

“Jephthah.” Pinhas almost spits the word. “Jephthah the Gileadite has no reason to be proud. He is an upstart who lives by the sword. The son of a prostitute. He was driven from his own father’s house.” The priest sweeps a hand in dismissal. “The man is no Abraham.”

As he turns from me, Pinhas announces to the air: “I am Pinhas the High Priest, son of Eleazar. If Jephthah wants my help, he must humble himself to ask for it.”

#

“Fifty-five stones,” Zebah announces, brushing the ground with her palm before she settles down across from us. We stay close enough to the tent to enjoy its shade while we eat a morning meal of parched grain and figs.

Sarah and I have decided that she should be the one to broach the plan. After all, she’s Zebah’s cousin, and older. But we are down to the last fig, and I wonder when she’ll begin.

Finally, Sarah presses the palms of her hands together. “Please hear me, Zebah. There’s not much time.”

Zebah closes her eyes, turns her head sideways, but Sarah continues.

“You’ve been praying for a miracle, and we’ve all been hoping for your father to have a change of heart, for God or someone to convince him that this vow is—” Sarah’s hands become fists squeezed together, silently drumming the air—“an abomination.”

Zebah lies back in the dirt, and I can’t even tell if she’s paying attention.

Sarah falls to her knees beside her. “Rachel and I think you should run away, Zebah. We will tell everyone a wild boar attacked you.” She leans forward. “Listen to me. Your father will probably be relieved if you don’t come back.”

Zebah starts to laugh and dribbles handfuls of dirt across her body. “He called me his jewel. What did that mean? When he came home from the market at Gilead and surprised me with a nose-ring of silver and topaz, did that mean nothing?” She lies still a moment, then drags her words: “When I was little, and he would hide among the ripened barley and chase me on his hands and knees—”

“He has seen many battles,” says Sarah, quietly. “Men are changed by that.”

I stand up. “Zebah, you need to know this. I talked to him two days ago. His face is set, and Pinhas refuses to intervene. If you want to live, you must go away.”

“We have five days’ provisions in the tent,” adds Sarah, “and a man’s cloak and tunic. Rachel can help you find the shepherds’ camp. It will be hard, I know, but what choice do you have?”

“I will go with you, Zebah.” My own words surprise me, but I know I mean them. “We will be all right.”

Zebah sits up and brushes herself off. “Thank you, both of you. But I am already a shade in Sheol. I promised my father I would return in two months. I gave him my pledge.”

#

The morning air is still and heavy, fragrant with the promise of rain. Sarah walks on Zebah’s right side, I on her left. At Mizpeh’s wall the maidens have gathered and go before us by twos and threes, tearing their hair and murmuring laments. As we enter the village, Zebah clutches my arm to slow our pace.

Hazy sunlight breaks against the mud brick houses, does not yet brighten the streets. They are strange streets, strange houses. But when the maidens disperse, Sarah and Zebah and I are standing in the courtyard of the Sanctuary. Most of the villagers have already assembled, though Pinhas is nowhere to be seen. In front of the altar stands Jephthah, his face darkened with ashes, the sacrificial knife in his hand. Some of the women sink to their knees, but no one looks away. Jephthah’s fingers reach for Zebah. One sharp breath, a flash of blade.

Then silence shakes the mountains.

*It thus became a custom in Israel for Israelite women to go yearly to mourn the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite for four days of the year.*

Judges 11:39b-40

JUDGE JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER CONFESSES  
*after events chronicled in Judges 11-12*

Already, the Ammonite dead were rotting in the sun  
 while we danced. There, in the dry street, he uttered  
 my sentence, and I never thought to question  
 the hard news, to protest the provisos  
 of my father's awful bargain with God.  
 Timbrels stilled and gaping revelers swayed,  
 but I begged only a brief stay  
 from the stark blade,  
 the stone altar.

I left it to the daughters of the forty-thousand  
 quarrelsome cousin Israelites he ordered  
 slaughtered by the Jordan's muddy fords  
 for fresh slights, old differences,  
 for failing to pronounce  
 the "sh" in "shibboleth"—  
 I left it to the daughters  
 of these fathers he translated  
 into the grave  
 to wonder whether Jephthah was  
 capable of speaking  
 God's language.

## HANNAH WISES UP

I dropped  
to my knees  
before the two pillars,  
my silent lips moving  
with such frenzy  
Eli the priest admonished  
me for drunkenness  
but God heard  
my parched heart  
crack.  
I thirsted  
for a child,  
a common longing  
among women, a routine  
exertion for the One  
who speaks  
creation.  
So why did I promise  
to relinquish so soon  
the very son  
I prayed for?  
to surrender to God  
the toddler  
my arms might have held?  
I dreamt of a skinny boy,  
sunny cheeks, scraped knees,  
and when I opened my eyes  
he was already striding away  
from me. My little Samuel,  
destined to be  
the last Judge of Israel,  
priest,  
prophet,  
anointer of kings.

I think God was using me.

THE SONG OF VASHTI  
*(from the Persian vahista, "best")*

How pleasant it was to live  
 in the shadow of King Ahasuerus,  
 my chambers in the royal house  
 arrayed with hangings of silk,  
 with gold and purple silk.

And sweet it was to taste  
 young pheasant, melon, and almond rice  
 from a table laden with silver  
 goblets and filigreed plates,  
 with sparkling, bejeweled plates.

In the fragrant palace gardens  
 we strolled over polished tiles,  
 the lapis-enameled lotus pools  
 reflected a shimmering moon,  
 or the bright-rimmed memory of moon.

He said that I was fair  
 as the morning, a lily, a pearl--  
 my neck an ivory tower,  
 my breasts two quivering fawns,  
 soft, unblemished twin fawns.

He said that I brought delight  
 to his eyes, his heart, his bed,  
 for I was a queen among maidens  
 and sweeter than nard or spice,  
 more precious than rarest spice.

Lesser wives and concubines  
 envied my place at his side.  
 Seven eunuchs bowed when I passed  
 and opened each door in my path,  
 my royal, petal-strewn path.

Such was my life for three years  
till the King, my husband, proclaimed  
a banquet for princes and courtiers  
to honor the goddess of plenty,  
Anahit—of love and of plenty.

For seven days the men  
caroused in the great columned hall,  
lounging on fine linen cushions  
embroidered with crimson and gold,  
with fringes and tassels of gold.

Meanwhile I entertained  
their favored wives and daughters  
in a separate, sunny courtyard  
at a sumptuous feast of our own,  
with music and mirth of our own.

Then, sated with meat and wine,  
and stories and songs and boastings,  
one of the men raised his cup,  
to praise the King and Anahit,  
the matchless beauty, Anahit.

“O Goddess of fertile Love,  
of waters overflowing,  
your beauty remains unequalled  
in Persia and through all the earth.  
You reign to the ends of the earth.

“And if our glorious King  
had a consort such as you,  
his couch would be a garden  
yielding rich harvest of sons,  
stalwart, magnificent sons!”

When he had finished speaking,  
the courtier poured out his cup  
at the feet of Anahit’s image,  
graven of pearl-white stone,  
of hyacinth-garlanded stone.

If he thought to please the King  
with this flowery speech and libation,  
he must have been surprised  
by Ahaseurus' reply,  
that hasty, unsober reply.

For the King on his ebony couch  
stretched forth his wide right hand  
to the chief eunuch standing close by,  
bearing the King's gold-orbed scepter,  
the finely-wrought, rule-wreaking scepter.

He grasped it and raised it high  
till a hush spread across the room,  
and Ahasuerus decreed  
that all should attend his words,  
should hearken and mark these words:

“Renowned for ageless beauty  
is the Goddess Anahit.  
But she is not more resplendent  
than my consort, Queen Vashti,  
than my treasure, Queen Vashti.”

“Bigtha, Biztha, and Zethar,  
Harbona, Abagtha, and Carkas,  
follow the trusted Mehuman  
to the courtyard of the Queen,  
present yourselves to the Queen.

“Announce that I desire  
princes and courtiers to see  
no form, no face can match  
Queen Vashti's beauty and grace,  
her perfect Persian grace.

“Instruct her to appear  
before us here tonight  
arrayed as the fairest goddess  
in naught but garland and crown,  
that all may honor the crown.”

The eunuchs delivered like arrows  
 these words as I entertained  
 my guests, and I watched faces pale  
 at the King's unseemly command,  
 his startling, strange command.

"Mehuman," I said, "are you certain  
 you heard my husband precisely?"  
 But all the eunuchs agreed  
 that the King had spoken thus,  
 holding scepter aloft, spoken thus.

Yet could I be meant to obey  
 an order so ill-advised—  
 present my royal person  
 to the gaze of many men,  
 a host of drunken men?

I glanced at the women around me,  
 their exquisite robes and jewels.  
 I noticed the tricks of light  
 on Mehuman's copper breastplate,  
 his fine, beaten copper breastplate.

"Convey to the King," I said,  
 "that my presence is needed here.  
 I am honored by his summons,  
 but cannot attend him now.  
 My own guests require me now."

Then I clapped my hands and ordered  
 a cushion of silver silk,  
 which I placed in the hands of Mehuman  
 for bearing my crown to the King,  
 my crown, in my stead, to the King.

Mehuman accepted my message  
 with a deferential bow,  
 keeping his own opinions  
 in the silence of his heart,  
 his guarded, eunuch's heart.

He carried the cushion before him  
flanked by his six attendants,  
with the ceremony due  
a royal emblem of Persia,  
the queen's diadem of Persia.

Awaiting the King's response,  
I joined in the singing of songs,  
dancing to laughter and castanets  
across the gold-flecked floor,  
the marble and porphyry floor.

And did my husband remember  
his protestations of love  
when the eunuchs escorted my crown  
to the banquet instead of me,  
when he saw they failed to bring me?

When he felt the prick to his pride  
in a room made foggy with wine,  
did he pause even once to recall  
the sweetness of former days,  
our tender nights and days?

When his counselors advised  
that he pronounce the ban  
against me and set it down  
so that it could not be changed,  
was that when my husband changed?

Or did I never know him?  
In the twinkling of an eye,  
my life and future changed,  
my crown and station ripped away:  
my husband turned his face away.

And soon through all the provinces  
the fairest maidens were sought—  
brought to the stronghold of Susa  
for the King to select his new queen,  
a more placable, suitable queen.

These maidens all vied to succeed me,  
to win the crown I had lost.  
Each spent a year preparing  
in the harem of the King,  
being pampered and plumed for the King.

Perfumed oils, henna rinses,  
face bloom, ocher, and kohl—  
they applied each enhancement known  
to whet a prince's desire,  
to inspire the King's desire.

Yet after the months of waiting,  
when summoned at last to his bed,  
(except for Esther) a single night  
was all they won—then the harem,  
the slow days and nights of the harem.

It is said that the exquisite Esther  
charms and pleases the King,  
yet the maidens unchosen waste  
their days in fruitless yearning,  
for his summons always yearning.

Banished from his sight now  
for ten years of forever,  
I sit surrounded always  
by forgotten concubines,  
beautiful concubines.

I say the life they long for  
is not quite what it seems,  
but having known the trappings  
of royal favor, they dream.  
In the silence of night, we dream.