

Three portraits of women from the Old Testament

Hagar

I am old now.
How will He judge me,
My husband's God,
If He and I indeed must meet?

Cruel?
I mocked a woman for her childlessness,
As if my body,
Heavy with her husband's child,
Had not been mockery enough.
I was a girl then,
Far from home,
And fancied I was meant for better things
Than servitude to an imperious mistress.
She had everything,
Except the thing she wanted most;
And that my young flesh gave him easily.
It galled her,
And I gloried in it.

But cruel?
It was from them, those two,
I learned the meaning of the word.
I never loved him, that old man.
I paid him the respect due age and station,
Receiving back a kindly condescension,
While my youth, so strictly rationed,
Was spent for him
Whose heart belonged to her.

But the boy—
All the love I could not give a husband
Or kinsmen I left behind in Egypt,
All for him.
The old man loved him, too;
And for the space of fourteen years,
The son whom I had given life
Gave life to me—
My pride, my bulwark, my security.

And then, another child,
Who came defying Nature,
Winter fruit of a tree nine decades barren,
Dry and sapless,
Ready for its death,
But giving life instead.

And I,
And Abraham's firstborn,
Cast into a desert waste,
A flask of water and some bread
The token of his love of fourteen years,
And left to die,
For all he knew.

Have you seen Beersheba?
Do you know the thirsty death
That stalks the air
With swollen tongue
And haunted, heat-glazed eyes?
Have you seen the camel drivers
Coming to the market in the town,
Beards dry as sand

And parched hands blackened by the searing sun,
Faces old beyond their years,
Eyes clenched against the suffocating wind?
In the wilderness from which they came,
The water gone,
The scorpion our only fellow moving thing,
I laid the boy to rest,
And turning from him,
With a heart as arid as my throat,
Addressed a final cry
To Him my husband said had sent us there—
“Let me not see him die!”

I did not ask Him to prolong my life,
Too long to me already.
But someone came,
Giving us to drink,
And promising a kingdom to my son.

A generous prophecy?
Or cruel?
I have forebodings
Of the cruelest things to come,
And yet, a vindication.
I see my children,
Outcasts still,
Butchers, fools and cowards
In a blind world's eyes;
But Isaac sits uneasy still
Amid a birthright falsely claimed,
The thorn of Ishmael ever present in his flesh,
Allowing no repose
And no forgetting.

Esther

Listen, my elder brother—
Listen, babe of the rushes of Egypt—
And advise me.

Your moment came in anger,
Suddenly.
The dead Egyptian and your destiny
Together lay before you,
And all your princely childhood lay behind.

For me, the choice is harder.
I have more time to think.
And the price of my allegiance to our kinsmen
May well be somewhat greater than my crown.
My sovereign looks on me more fondly
Than Pharaoh did on you;
But past events remind me
Even beauty which has shared
His sceptre and bedchamber
May not deter his wrath,
Once kindled.
And if I light that spark,
I fear that no Red Sea
Will open up for me,
Or quench the flame.

Staring into darkness,
Pondering my appointment on the morrow,
I ask you this, my Levite cousin:
Have you had regrets?
Some second thoughts?
You struggled with a mulish people
In the desert, forty years,
And never saw your promised land.
If I risk everything tomorrow,
What chance that I shall ever see
My scattered tribe's salvation?
And if we live, what then?
Your people made a calf of molten gold
While God was on the mount before them.
Here, the calf surrounds us, overwhelms us;
And Sinai's hill is far away,
And silent.

Your answer's hard.
Your deed is done,
Your reputation made.
If I confess my lineage tomorrow,
And die for it,
How will Esther be remembered?
A martyr by my people?
A traitor by my husband's?
A fool by all?

So be it, then.
The band that fled from Pharaoh's armies
Were not more stubborn than their leader.
If I am condemned,
I may have more to say to you
While waiting for a still more dreadful dawn.
If I succeed,
Then be assured
Your vengeful dictum will not go unheeded.
There shall be slaughter in the Persian realm
Worthy of all ten plagues.

Enough now.
Day is coming,
And the cooks need supervision.

Hannah

It's almost time to go—
Of course; it has been time now for a year.
But isn't there just one more door to be secured,
A window still unlatched,
Some bin of grain where mice could still intrude,
To call me from this cradle for a moment
And delay a little yet the keeping of the pledge,
The giving of the gift so sorely gained?

He sleeps so soundly.
Always, even swaddled in the womb's dark, dewy blanket,
He was quiet—
So quiet that I often felt my heart constrict in fear,
A moment's thought that all was as before,
That once again my hope had died e'er it had time to live;
That where in woman there should lie
A tiny nest where life's first kindled spark
Could draw its breath and grow,
God placed in me a bleeding, fruitless orb.

How hard it was for him—
He who waits now at the door,
His arms outstretched in grief and gentle strength,
His kind face saying I must come
And hold no longer back
Fulfillment of a vow in anguish made,
The rendering up of this, our long-awaited and firstborn,
To Him who heard my heart's depth's prayer at last
And let my barren soil give life—

How hard for him to listen to my cries,
Day in, year out,
At times a peevish, shrill complaint,
Showing me worthier to be
The child I longed to bear
Than mother to a child;
At other times a deep-welled anguish,
Tearing at the fibres of my heart,
And leaving it
As empty as the womb beneath.
"My heart," he often cried,
Dismayed by yet another fount of tears,
"Am I not better to thee than ten sons?"
And how to make a meeting of man's pride and woman's longing?
To tell him how the very love that drew me
To unite with him in spirit and in flesh
Demanded living fruit from seed thus sown?

At last, pouring that day upon the shrine
Tears from a well I thought long since burned dry,
I asked once more.
The priest believed me drunk.
How could he know
I groaned and stumbled in the desperate blindness
Of a spirit that has long its view of God?
I asked once more,
And knowing now

My tears were not enough,
I added yet one thing—
That bargain full of dread:
A servant for a son.
I would not keep him long,
But send him from me as a child
To serve the Giver all his days.
If this proved not enough
I would not ask again;
For I would know
There was no one to hear,
Or one too void of feeling
To be any kin to us.

The pact was made.
I dare not to deny
He did His part.
I must do mine.
But how could I have known
I had not plumbed
The depths of pain yet after all?
And kneeling here,
To wake my son
From babyhood's last sleep,
I feel He asks too much.
Did I?