

Preaching the Great Stories of Genesis
Calvin College Worship Symposium
Workshop A24
Rev. Laura Sumner Truax

I. Why Genesis?

In the beginning there was...

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A Felt Need.

II. Oral History

What's gets left in, what gets left out and why? The beginning of dialogue.

What the stories meant in the time they occurred.

The meanings of the stories in Jewish history.

Some of the meanings of the stories now.

Midrash

Psychodrama

Cultural Cues

III. Themes of Genesis

Leaving Home

One is the loneliest number

Stopping the cycle

The Terrible Twos

The other side of blessing

I am....SOMEBODY!

In the beginning, God. In the end, God.

IV. Unexpected Voices
Ham & Shem

Leah

Ishmael

Esau

Abimelech

Genesis 3:23

The Mountain Goats

From *The Life of the World to Come*, 2009

House up in Clearlake
Where I used to live
Picked the lock on the front door
And felt it give

Touch nothing move nothing stand still
Keep my ears open for cars
See how the people here live now
Hope they're better at it than I was

I used to live .. here (4x)

Pictures up on the mantle
Nobody I know
I, stand by the tiny furnace
Where the long shadows grow

Living room to bedroom to kitchen
Familiar and warm
Hours we spent starving within these walls
Sounds of a distant storm

I used to live .. here (4x)

Fight through the ghosts in the hallway
Duck and weave
Stand by the door with my eyes closed
When it's time to leave

Steal home before sunset
Cover up my tracks
Drive home with old dreams of play in my mind
And the wind at my back
Break the lock on my own garden gate
When I get home after dark
Sit looking up at the stars outside
Like teeth in the mouth of a shark

I used to live .. here (4x)

Genesis 30:3

The Mountain Goats

From *The Life of the World to Come* (2009)

For several days the visitors were here
We saw them turned down and we watched them disappear
Talked about the days they'd said were sure to come
Had a hard time believing

I remember seeing you my tongue struck dumb
When you first came here from wherever it was you came from
The power in your voice
Your rough touch

Open up the door to the tent
Wonder where the good times went
I will do what you ask me to do
Because of how I feel about you

I saw his little face contract as his eyes met light
Tried to imagine anything so bright
You only see it once and then it steals into the dawn
And then it's gone forever

For several hours we lay there the last ones of our kind
Harder days coming maybe I don't mind
Sounds kind of dumb when I say it but it's true
I would do anything for you

Open up the promise of the day
Drive the dark things away
I will do what you ask me to do
Because of how I feel about you
You keeping care of me
Keeping watch

The Man Watching

by Rainer Maria Rilke

I can tell by the way the trees beat, after
so many dull days, on my worried windowpanes
that a storm is coming,
and I hear the far-off fields say things
I can't bear without a friend,
I can't love without a sister

The storm, the shifter of shapes, drives on
across the woods and across time,
and the world looks as if it had no age:
the landscape like a line in the psalm book,
is seriousness and weight and eternity.

What we choose to fight is so tiny!
What fights us is so great!
If only we would let ourselves be dominated
as things do by some immense storm,
we would become strong too, and not need names.

When we win it's with small things,
and the triumph itself makes us small.
What is extraordinary and eternal
does not want to be bent by us.
I mean the Angel who appeared
to the wrestlers of the Old Testament:
when the wrestler's sinews
grew long like metal strings,
he felt them under his fingers
like chords of deep music.

Whoever was beaten by this Angel
(who often simply declined the fight)
went away proud and strengthened
and great from that harsh hand,
that kneaded him as if to change his shape.
Winning does not tempt that man.
This is how he grows: by being defeated, decisively,
by constantly greater beings.

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Blessed Be Your Name
In the land that is plentiful
Where Your streams of abundance flow
Blessed be Your name

Blessed Be Your name
When I'm found in the desert place
Though I walk through the wilderness
Blessed Be Your name

Every blessing You pour out
I'll turn back to praise
When the darkness closes in, Lord
Still I will say

Blessed be the name of the Lord
Blessed be Your name
Blessed be the name of the Lord
Blessed be Your glorious name

Blessed be Your name
When the sun's shining down on me
When the world's 'all as it should be'
Blessed be Your name

Blessed be Your name
On the road marked with suffering
Though there's pain in the offering
Blessed be Your name

Every blessing You pour out
I'll turn back to praise
When the darkness closes in, Lord
Still I will say

Blessed be the name of the Lord
Blessed be Your name
Blessed be the name of the Lord
Blessed be Your glorious name

Blessed be the name of the Lord
Blessed be Your name
Blessed be the name of the Lord
Blessed be Your glorious name

You give and take away
You give and take away
My heart will choose to say
Lord, blessed be Your name

Matt Redman, Beth Redman
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The Biography
Thomas Merton

Oh read the verses of the loaded scourges,
And what is written in their terrible remarks:
"The Blood runs down the walls of Cambridge town,
As useless as the waters of the narrow river --
While pub and alley gamble for His vesture."

Although my life is written on Christ's Body like a map,
The nails have printed in those open hands
More than then abstract names of sins,
More than the countries and the towns,
The names of streets, the number of the houses,
The record of the days and nights,
When I have murdered Him in every square and street.

Lance and thorn, and scourge and nail
Have more than made His flesh my chronicle.
My journeys more than bite His bleeding feet.

Christ, from my cradle, I had known you everywhere,
And even though I sinned, I walked in You, and knew

You were my world:

You were my France and England,
My seas and my America:
You were my life and air, and yet I would not own You.

Oh, when I loved You, even while I hated You,
Loving and yet refusing You in all the glories of Your universe

It was your living Flesh I tore and trampled, not the air and earth:

Not that you feel us in created things,
But knowing you, in them, made ever sin a sacrilege;
And every act of greed became a desecration,
Spoiled and dishonored You as in Your Eucharist.

And yet with every wound You robbed me of a crime,
And as each blow was paid with Blood,
You paid me also each sin with greater graces.
For even as I killed You,
You made Yourself a greater thief than any in Your company,
Stealing my sins into Your dying life,
Robbing me even of my death.

Where, on what cross my agony will come
I do not ask You:
For it is written and accomplished here,
On every Crucifix, on every altar.
It is my narrative that drowns and is forgotten
In your five open Jordans,
Your voice that cries my: "*Consummatum est.*"

If on Your Cross Your life and death and mine are one,
Love teaches me to read, in You, the rest of a new history.
I trace my days back to another childhood,

Exchanging, as I go,
New York and Cuba for Your Galilee,
And Cambridge for Your Nazareth,
Until I come again to my beginning,
And find a manger, star and straw,
A pair of animals, some simple men,
And thus I learn that I was born,
Now not in France, but Bethlehem.

Taken from
The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton
© 1977 New Directions Publishing

State what a myth is.

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The Myth of Sacrifice

Between the return of Abraham and Sarah from Egypt and the banishment of Ishmael we find a series of interrelated stories that concentrate on Abraham's life in Canaan and his relationship to his nephew Lot, and they deserve elaboration. But they will not receive it here. I pass over how in the course of time Abraham became a warrior when he went off to rescue his brother's son from captivity; how the two of them subsequently argued and had a falling out; how they separated, and Lot went to live in Sodom. It would take me too far afield to examine in any detail how that city became corrupt and how God planned its destruction. I do not deal here with one of the most impressive stories of Abraham, when he came before the presence of God to argue for mercy for the inhabitants of Sodom if, among them, only a handful of innocent citizens could be found. In these passages Abraham appears as advocate, as host, as clan king received and recognized by the Canaanites. Through it all he is ever the dubious outsider, the resident alien, but by his deeds and under the sponsorship of his God, he and Sarah achieve a measure of security, wealth, power, and freedom in Canaan.

At last, too, Sarah becomes the mother of his child. The promise first delivered to him when he left his native land and father's house appears to be coming true. Ishmael is now gone; Hagar, too; and for many years, the family clan lives in apparent, untroubled peace.

A participant in a psychodrama once put it well and helped me to see the life of the ancestral family through these years. As Sarah she said,

For a long time now we have lived in Canaan among the Philistines. Often I remember Abraham's father as he was in Haran, for in that land and at that time I last enjoyed a simple life.

Indeed for years now God has left me and Abraham alone, and, to be honest, I have not missed Him. Perhaps our ways have pleased Him; perhaps He has been busy with other people in other lands. Abraham, Isaac, and I have settled in our ways, and I rarely think about the promise or the future. Life is ordinary, and ordinary life is a blessing after what we've been through. Even though I have been a witness to and a participant in mysteries, the habit of the ordinary has gradually taken hold of me. I trust life in its regularities and rhythms. My heart has healed of its losses; I love again with the heart of an ordinary woman. I love my husband, my son, my work, my life. And we are growing old in peace.

So I was given a glimpse of Sarah's life as Isaac grows to young manhood. This life hovers in the silence between the end of chapter 21: "And Abraham sojourned in the land of the Philistines for many years" (21:34) and the beginning of chapter 22, when God, wrenching him from his settled life, calls Abraham one last time to "leave . . . and go."

With the tale of Abraham's final summons and sacrifice, I come to the molten core of the patriarchal tradition. It is a nightmare place where Imagination conceives its ultimate ordeal. Though it occupies a mere nineteen verses in the biblical narrative, this story of Abraham and Isaac has haunted me since I first heard it. No matter how many times I encounter it I cannot read it without feeling the simultaneous pull of different aspects of myself; I am at once judging, comprehending, rejecting, fearful, awestruck, admiring, loathing. I see the meaning and the nonsense.

In a life full of initiations, this is Abraham's last initiation. In a life full of sacrifices, this is his ultimate sacrifice. We arrive at that place in his vocational life where the issues of greatness and madness, faith and delusion, the highest good and the highest evil, cannot be easily distinguished. We come in this story of Abraham and Isaac to the central myth of the patriarchal imagination—the father's sacrifice of the son, and the son's participation in that sacrifice.

Some time after, God put Abraham to the test. God spoke to him and said, "Abraham." And he answered, "Here I am."

And God said, "Leave with your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights which I will point out to you."

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So early the next morning, Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his young servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him.

On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his servants, "You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you." Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked off together.

Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father."

And he answered, "Yes, my son."

And he said, "Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?"

And Abraham said, "God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them walked on together.

They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Abraham built an altar there; he laid out wood; he bound his son; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son.

Then the voice of the Lord called to him, "Abraham! Abraham!"

And he answered, "Here I am."

And the voice spoke again, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. Now I know that you are in awe of God, since you have not withheld even your son, your favored one from Me."

When Abraham looked up his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by his horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son. And Abraham named that height the Place Where God Provides or, as some say, On the Mountain of God There Is Vision.

And God once again filled Abraham with the promise of blessing and nation.

(22:1-14, 17-19)



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I have played out this story many times. Here are some shards to suggest the shape of that work where one by one participants walked into the story, feeling their way into Abraham's heart line by line.

"Leave with your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah."

"Once again I am told to 'leave . . . and go' just as I was told so many years ago. I remember all too well what that first call cost me. It cost me everything. Or at least it seemed everything at the time. But now I must 'leave . . . and go,' this time with my son. Go where and why? I am tired, and I am afraid."

"But," quarrels another Abraham, "he is not my only son. There is, there was, Ishmael. I remember Ishmael's birth and boyhood; I remember another rite and sacrifice. The boy was scared; his face was white. His eyes pleaded and asked me 'Why?' I did it first to myself, made light of it to ease his fears. 'God has asked this of us,' I said. What could he know of God? What has been real for me has only been a word for others. Am I always to look into the face of my sons and see fear?"

"And Sarah . . . what am I to say to my wife?"

" . . . go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights which I will point out to you."

Another person takes up the part of Abraham. "When God tells me to go to the land of Moriah and offer Isaac there as a burnt offering—a burnt offering!—I have no words for the image that comes into my mind. What sound does the breaking of a heart make? In this instant something dies in me, and it is not my 'belief' in this God. If my belief died, then there would be no obedience, no need to make the journey. My love dies, any love I might have felt for this God."

"I see images of my son on a pyre, bound on the tinder, the torch set to the wood, the flames are the last things in my mind before I fall asleep each night of the three nights we travel to Moriah. Each night I must say in the face of these images, have faith . . . you do not know . . . perhaps not. I must become a witness to my own inflamed imagination, for if I cannot find my detachment, I will be burned to a cinder."

Another voice: "Then there are spells of blankness when one foot merely falls in front of another. There are moments when I look aside at Isaac,

see the sunlight on the boy's shoulders, the wind in his hair, and I must turn away quickly. Too much. You ask too much."

The father walks with his son.

How do we imagine his soliloquy? Perhaps not words, perhaps only images, memories. Images and memories that come in spite of his attempts to numb himself to the ordeal, to make his mind a blank, to put one foot in front of the other in some wooden obedience he can never fully achieve. He cannot stop feeling. What is it like to be a father every step of the way?

"Take your son . . . whom you love . . . your only son Isaac."

Isaac whose name means "he shall laugh." On these three days all laughter dies.

Three days. It is the duration of the dying. It is long enough for a man to think of everything more than once, to pass back and forth again and again over some imaginary threshold, entering, quitting, entering again until the doorstep is worn down. Long enough for a man to become acquainted with every part of himself, all the voices in their diverse articulations that prompt diverse actions. Time enough for memory; and time enough to realize that the mind can no longer conceive of a future. There is no time "after" this time, or if there is time after, it is empty. It is not possible for me to imagine Abraham thinking any longer of his future. Not his own personal future, nor the grand scheme, the promise, for which he would not willingly sacrifice so much. It is not for the future that he walks toward Moriah. Time is bound into three days, then two days, then one day. Then hours, minutes, seconds ahead.

"And always the question lives in me: Can I go on? Do I choose to go on, when every part of me urges me to choose not to go on? With each step on each day I choose to go on; with each step I am free not to go on, yet I go on freely; in each step where I place my forward foot down, I can still choose to turn away."

"The promise of land and nations is a mirage and a madness. I must slaughter my hope. It makes no sense that I am to kill the one upon whom a future depends. Perhaps then only the willingness is asked. Yet who knows?"

On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his servants, "You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you." Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked off together.

So in the end we come to the mountaintop, to the rude stone altar, to the fagots laid on the stones, to the rope and the binding of the boy. Participants pair up, one as Abraham, one as Isaac, and we explore the scene in mute action. Several of us absolutely cannot allow ourselves to be bound, and Abraham cannot compel them. This scene verges on the traumatic; it recalls trauma. Only Isaac's strange willingness and Abraham's suffering keep this from being sheer abuse. Afterward, those who allowed themselves to be bound report feeling the strangest mixture of shame and peace, and an incredible curiosity.

"I knew I was going to be spared at the last minute. I knew the story had a 'happy ending.' It was impossible to forget that. But for Isaac in the story, for Abraham?"

The question hangs over an abyss.

"I wanted my son to resist, to run away, to end this game with his will. * And I wanted him to lie still."

"I am cleaned out, scraped raw inside. In the end I come to the task with such a stillness inside me that the ropes do not need to be tied, for my stillness passes to my son as a kind of deep calm. My eyes are streaming with tears, but there are no sobs, no cries, no words. I am looking into his eyes."

"Abraham!"

The father pauses. Deliverance?

"I cannot trust myself. I have prayed for this too long, too hard. The voice that calls my name sounds too much like my own voice, like my own imagination in a last leap, imitating God."

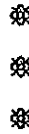
"Abraham!"

The knife drops from a hand now raised against the brilliance of the light.

A ram is found; an animal sacrifice replaces the human one, and then, in one final repetition of the promise, the story ends with the last words God ever speaks to Abraham. Or perhaps from this time forward Abraham never listens to Him again.

One person in our group claimed that Abraham knew all along that God was testing him and that in the end his son would be spared. Another claimed that Abraham was testing God even as he was being tested, seeing whether in fact this God would go that far. A third said that Abraham was testing himself to see how far he would go in obedience to this God, and he found, to his great horror, that he could go all the way. A fourth said that God was appalled at man's obedience and afterward promised himself He would never ask so much of men again. A fifth said that an angel arrested Abraham in the act and

ought to comfort him, but it was too late; Abraham's soul was already traveling at the speed of light into an infinite darkness. A sixth said that Abraham turned the knife against the breast of the angel. A seventh said that when Abraham went to take the ram from the brambles, he wept over it, held it, tucked it in his arms, a mad old man, and that it was finally Isaac who had to say it. An eighth said that Abraham came down the mountain without Isaac, knowing that their ways had parted forever. A ninth said that this is a fable of a secluded man with a twisted soul who then imagines a twisted God in his own image. A tenth said that Abraham will forever stand as the man of faith who tells us in this fable what is terrible and wonderful in faith.



find these ten in my heart. And there are four others.

The first to press forward in me to respond to this passage is Peter, the father of Zachary. My son is now sixteen years old. Not long ago I watched him play soccer on a field in the Vermont hills, trees turning color in Indian summer. On such a day more than thirty-five years ago and in a place not far away, I saw a fly on a windowpane; I played soccer on such an afternoon; and in just such a parents' weekend my father watched me.

This week I picked up some photographs I had taken at the end of summer during a week we spent at the New Jersey shore, my wife, my daughter, Zak, and I. Pictures of Zak: on a surfboard, playing catch, and one where, olden-skinned from the sun, his fine brown hair long over his eyes, his black shirt askew over his shoulder, he is grinning out at me with an unveiled delight.

Surely every father has such photographs, whether camera taken or simply recorded in the album of the heart: the boy laughing as he is tossed in the air. The look of the boy as he turns to you keen with some satisfaction. Running toward you, arms flung wide. Laughing at a joke. Blushing, pleased at some tale of him you're telling to a friend. Warming to your pride. Opening a gift you have selected for him, wide-eyed and eager. Listening rapt as you read him a story, sing him a song. A single parent for many years, I have tucked this son in bed a thousand times, lingered with him while he clung to the day and then let go, mouth going slack, breathing slow at last, features softening into sleep while I gazed down on him. The innocence and beauty of his face have brought tears to my eyes more than once. At such a time my own distant boyhood has stood beside me and placed its small hand in mine. I could not believe that my own father could ever have loved me and cherished me any more than I now love and in this instant cherish my son.

This is my favored one, my only son, whom I love.

There is a vein of pure gold that runs through the mountain of fatherhood. In places the seam is wide; the ore plays over the surface of the rock like a many-fingered stream. It disappears deep into the mountain; it winds to its core. That gold is the innocence of the boy, hand thrust into yours, walking through the city for the first time or through the woods at night. That gold is the beauty of your son, lean-boned, fast, alive, the animal wildness electric on the skin. It is the tenderness of boyhood, the still-quick tears that rise at a joke that cuts where it was only meant to tease, or the pain in the eyes, the incomprehension, for the animal run over at dusk on a country road. It is the gold of his concentration, appraised from the doorway as you watch his intent fingers mold or shape or build or take apart, unaware of you the gazer. Boy—it rhymes with joy. Son is sun. What father can accurately assay this mineral of sheer pride and pleasure that glints with longing, too, for his own lost and distant youth?

This father in me reads the story of Abraham setting out to kill his son, "the laughter whom you love," and is dumbfounded. This father knows he could never do for any reason what Abraham will do. A father who could do such a thing has first killed the father in his heart. Only in the horrors of death camps, only in some insane Masada of zealous belligerence, only in the final nightmare of impossible choices, might a father bring himself to such an act.

But such an act would destroy, not ennoble, the soul. There can be no greatness here, only delusion. And any God that could ask this of a father, could "test" a father in this way, is only the devil in disguise. Any religion that preserves this story, hallows such a father, reverses the heart that can pass the test, is sick.

A second father steps from the shadow of the first.

It is a summer night. Dinner is done; my son bolts from the table to answer the phone and then grabs his skateboard to head out with his friends. He has been sullen and remote through the hastily gobbled meal. Monosyllables. "Fine." "Nothin'." "No." "Leave me alone." Ketchup on the placemat. French fries on the floor.

"Zak," I begin gently, "please clear your dishes; clean up your place before you go." He drops the skateboard, marring the linoleum. A pained expression settles on his face. I have asked him to undertake one of the labors of Hercules. Taking a plate to the sink, he steps on a potato, mashing it into the floor. He doesn't notice. His dash at the placemat with the sponge leaves a bloody streak; he heaves the sponge toward the sink, it ricochets off the window. Zak is grabbing up his skateboard, heading for the door.

constant series of tests of his faith and freedom; he becomes the exemplar of a man of self-control, and his covenants with God forge two parties into a pact held within the limits of their words.

The tying of bonds is accomplished by the making of knots. Knots remind me of R. D. Laing's little book by that name about psychological knots, what he calls "double binds," paradoxical situations in which you are damned if you do and damned if you don't. Double binds speak to us of impossible alternatives, of no-win situations, and of their particular anguish. At its most intense, the double bind can break us; the psyche that wrestles with itself seizes up and then goes mad. Madness anesthetizes the anguish of the bind; one can be numb, split off, annul all feeling like the schizophrenic. We cannot read the Akedah without sensing how Abraham writhes in the coils of the double bind.

Bond is cognate with band. The wedding band is symbolic of the wedding bond. From bond and band come bondage and bandage, hinting at a paradox: Where I am bound, there I may be healed, for bands may constrict but they may also contain, wrap, swathe, and protect. By extension the family, the clan, is called a band, held and holding together. Bonds are the invisible thongs of community, words made into vows or oaths, call them covenants, nothing finally more substantial than air, the forming of the breath into words. These bonds, however they may be materialized by institution and symbol, begin and end as images, fragments of imagination, fictions. But words bound toward matter as the sperm leaps toward the egg. Words, mere words, are the sperm seeds from which we would make the world.

So the Akedah story is about all these associations: bind, binding, bound, bonded, bond, bondage, bounded, boundary, double bind, bandage, and band. But it is also about direction, as in "homeward bound." Abraham and Isaac are together Mystery bound.

The Akedah tells the story of the initiations of a boy into his spiritual manhood and of a father into an even deeper dimension of himself. The binding is traumatic for both of them. Trauma is a wounding, but their anguish is sacrificial and makes life sacred. In such wounds, trauma and blessing seem inextricably bound. Alice Miller notwithstanding, patriarchy honors such wounds while suffering them as well. These are the wounds no therapy can—or should seek to—heal, for they are the mysterious and formative events of the soul.

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Sarah's Dreams: A Midrash

Night One

I dream I am sitting at the opening to the tent. I am alone, as if the whole clan had departed with Abraham and Isaac. There are no neighboring tents of kin or serving people. I am surrounded by a great quiet, and from here I can look down into a valley through which a broad stream winds. I can see meadows and upland pastures, wildflowers, and the shadows of clouds.

Suddenly I realize I am in Haran, the very countryside from which Abram and I, Lot, and our straggling retinue set out long ago. I am back and flooded with a longing that is bone deep. I begin to weep. All the while I am puzzled, though, at how empty and strangely desolate the place is. This is Haran before Abram and I arrived there, before anyone did. It is virgin and unsettled and beautiful in its peace and silence.

I am aware of a figure coming toward me through the tall grass below. I see a red kerchief that ties the hair off the face; I see the glint of copper bands on the wrist and I hear them jingle against each other. A woman is approaching, and before I can quite make her out, I am reminded—something in the stride, the set of the head makes me think—of Hagar. My heart bounds inside me for a moment, and then I am afraid.

And then I see it is Hagar; she crosses the hilltop toward me, picking her way among scattered stones. How old she has become, her hair streaked gray and her face wrinkled and dry from the sun. Poor Hagar, to have aged so much.

Hagar approaches me, but she does not bow. She stands before me, lean and waiting. I feel a brief surge of anger at her disrespect, but it passes, and I pat the ground beside me, inviting her to sit. She does. I can hear her breath coming strong from the exertion of the climb, and suddenly I remember Hagar's breath when Ishmael was born. Oh, she pants like an animal and then gives a scream that rises into an exultant cry as the infant squirms from her body. In my dream I look down as if expecting to see a baby laid upon her knees, soaking her smock with blood.

"I've come a long way back to you."

"Why have you come?"

"You called me back."

"I did? I did not. I never called."

"You called. Or something called and I came."

"Something is always calling in this world. I didn't call."

"Well, I'm here."

We sit in silence. Shadows pass over the hills. In my dream I know that we are both remembering Abraham. That's why she has come.

"I loved him."

"I know."

"He was gentle with me, but he did not love me. It was you he loved. But I loved him."

"He loved Ishmael."

"My son."

In my dream a wind now rises over the fields and hillside. It is night, and in the bright moonlight the tall grasses sway. Suddenly there is a clatter and movement, and an animal—it is a ram—bolts past the tent. To my horror I see its neck is rudely slashed. It streams blood. Its eyes are terrified and piteous. At that moment I awake.



Night Two

It seems to me that my eyes open to the darkness around me. No moon, no starlight, and it seems that someone, or something, stands beside me in my tent. I am afraid and lie very still. I want and do not want to see who or what has come into my tent. I feel it is an animal, something as august and majestic as a lion, but more sentient. Then I know that what stands above me in the dark can speak, for I feel its intelligence.

"Where is my husband?"

A voice comes to me, but not through my ears. I hear it speaking to me inside me. "He has taken your son, Isaac, on a journey."

"Where have they gone?"

"They have gone some distance from here, to the land of Moriah."

"Why?"

"I appeared again to Abraham and told him to take Isaac. It was time for us to meet."

"I don't want Isaac to know you. I want Isaac to have a different kind of life. I don't want a wanderer's life for him. His place is here."

"Abraham obeys me; Abraham is going to give his son to me."

"Isaac is my son, too. He will always be my son."

"But there is a part of him that belongs to me. It is something you cannot understand. It is not something a mother can understand."

"I understand everything. I understand this journey of Abraham's is a folly."

"Isaac wants to know what his father knows."

"No, he doesn't. The boy was terrified to leave. He clung to me. I saw his eyes. It was as if he already knew something terrible was going to happen. That's what I saw."

"That's what a mother sees."

"That's what there is to see. He's a boy."

"Only a fool would ask for me."

"Isaac is too young to be chosen."

"No, he has been chosen. He is frightened, but a part of him you can't see chooses to go with his father. His fate is with his father. He will be a man."

"What will happen to him?"

"He will die, and I will take him."

In my dream then I sit bolt upright with the single word *No!* screaming soundlessly inside of me, the cry one hears oneself utter in dreams, longer and more piercing than breath. It rises up through my bones and fills the sky. It blazes from me, rounding to a wall. I will myself in the pitch dark of my dream to see the figure that stands above me. And behold! My eyes see in that dark, rearing up above me, tall as a tree, the powerful and sinuous form of a serpent.



Night Three

I am running. With an indefatigable strength in me, I run. I seem to draw the energy of the fields into me as I run. I draw into me the energy of

the animals as I run. Stream and river run through me; moon and stars course through me; the light of the sun sings in my blood as I run. I run like the wind, and as the wind I pass over the ground, stirring the undergrowth. My hair streams backward like the mane of a horse, like the foam of the waves blown back by wind, my hair flows back. My feet spark light where they touch as I run.

I am running across time to reach the man and the boy who are even now climbing the mountain. Even at this distance I can hear his voice saying, "Shema, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echod." The plain gathers and passes beneath me as I run toward the man and the boy, who are even now building the altar, and the voice of the man carries to me, "Shema, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echod." The trees of the forested hillsides part before me and make a broad path as I speed toward the man and the boy, who even now are placing the timber on the piled-up stones. The voice of the man sounds the refrain again and again, "Shema, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echod." The wind lifts me above the brambles and the thickets as I race toward the man, who even now is binding the boy to lay him on the altar. The voice of the man is now joined by the voice of the boy, together saying, "Shema, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echod."

The stones willingly place themselves like stairs up the slope that I may fly upward toward the height, where even now the man is raising the knife above him. "Shema, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echod," say both voices in unison. And just as the arm begins its descent, I hurl my voice like a javelin is hurled toward the onrushing lion, like the stone is hurled from the slingshot toward the wolf: "Abraham!" But my voice does not interrupt the voices, which say again, "Shema, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echod," nor does it stop the arm as it descends. I leap toward the descending arm, my voice like the scream of the hawk that breaks the dawn, "Abraham!" And the knife enters my heart.



Night Four

I am dressed as a queen, and I come to a great circle of women. I recognize them all. My grandmother and mother are there. Rebecca is there, who will marry my son; Rachel is there, who will marry my grandson; and Leah, Zipporah, Bilhah, who will make sons through my grandson; the wives of Ishmael are there, and of Esau; the wives of the sons of Israel are there, and their daughters are there. Dinah is there. Tamar is there. And beyond them, circle upon circle, are the women of Egypt, mothers who have lost sons,

mothers yet to be mothers yet whose stories already live in the womb of time, like embryos.

The circle of this host of women opens for me; I enter as a queen, and there at the center with their arms extended toward me are Eve and a black queen who I know is Lilith, the mother of Eve. A sound rises up in this host of women, a sound like the wind makes through the trees, a rushing whisper, and for a moment I who dream am a spectator to the dream, and I see Sarah the queen; I see her face, and just before the circle closes around her, I see that her eyes, her fading eyes, are full of tears.