

I love Abraham, that old weather-beaten  
unwavering nomad; when God called to him,  
no tender hand wedged time into his stay.  
His faith erupted him into a way  
far-off and strange. How many miles are there  
from Ur to Haran? Where does Canaan lie,  
or slow mysterious Egypt sit and wait?  
How could he think his ancient thigh would bear  
nations, or how consent that Isaac die,  
with never an outcry or an anguished prayer?  
I think, alas, how I manipulate  
dates and decisions, pull apart the dark,  
dally with doubts here and with counsels there,  
take out old maps and stare.  
Was there a call at all, my fears remark.  
I cry out: Abraham, old nomad you,  
are you my father? Come to me in pity.  
Mine is a far and lonely journey too.

*(Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers 66)*

Abraham to kill him  
Was distinctly told--  
Isaac was an Urchin--  
Abraham was old--

Not a hesitation--  
Abraham complied--  
Flattered by Obeisance  
Tyranny demurred--

Isaac--to his children  
Lived to tell the tale--  
Moral--with a Mastiff  
Manners may prevail.  
*(The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson 571-2)*

"Take Your Only Son"

None guessed our nearness to the land of vision,  
not even our two companions to the mount.  
That you bore wood and I, by grave decision,  
fire and a sword, they judged of small account.

Speech might leap wide to what were best unspoken  
and so we plodded, silent, through the dust.  
I turned my gaze lest the heart be twice broken  
when innocence looked up to smile its trust.

O love far deeper than a lone begotten,  
how grievingly I let your words be lost  
when a shy question guessed I had forgotten  
a thing so vital as the holocaust.

Hope may shout promise of reward unending  
and faith buy bells to ring its gladness thrice,  
but these do not preclude earth's tragic ending  
and the heart shattered in its sacrifice.

Not beside Abram does my story set me.  
I built the altar, laid the wood for flame.  
I stayed my sword as long as duty let me,  
and then alas, alas, no angel came.

*(Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers 153)*

# Lot's Wife

hibakusha (hi bak sha), explosion-afflicted person. The term coined by the Japanese to signify those who were exposed to the radiation of atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The moment I saw the strangers at the door,  
men, without women, I was afraid,  
I begged Lot not to take them in.  
Muffled in dusty cloaks  
they accepted hospitality  
as if they were superior beings.  
They were too beautiful—  
faced hard and polished—  
the light couldn't enter them,  
it fell away, baffled.  
But Lot was impressed by their authority,  
he loved authority, loved  
to use it. The men, we  
thought they were men then,  
they didn't care for us.  
You could see they had a job to do  
and that was all. They were looking  
at us but thinking about the job.

"Sweeney was like most bomber pilots who have  
formed a defensive armor about their particular role in  
war. Their function is to drop bombs on targets not on  
people. Were they to think otherwise, to be ordered to  
drop a bomb on say, 2,567 men, women, and children,  
they would probably go mad. A target was a different  
matter. . . ."

Lot and the strangers talked about good and evil  
while our daughters and I served them  
at table. And Lot bowed low when they said  
that he was a God-fearing man who would never  
do anything wicked like his neighbors.

I knew my neighbors,  
women like myself, going to the well,  
weaving and spinning,  
raising the family.  
The little boys were noisy,  
dirty, and quick,  
the little girls, shy, quieter,  
but sturdy.

" . . . girls, very young girls, not only with their clothes  
torn off but with their skin peeled off as well. I thought  
should there be a hell this was it—the Buddhist hell  
where we were taught people who could not attain  
salvation always went."

I saw the strangers look at our daughters  
not as men look at women  
but as we might look at dumb brutes—  
no, not even that—for often we recognize  
ourselves in their uncomprehending  
helplessness. They simply looked  
but did not see.

"The most impressive thing was the expression in  
people's eyes . . . their eyes looking for someone to  
come and help them. The eyes—the emptiness—the  
helpless expression were something I will never  
forget . . . they looked at me with very great expectation  
staring right through me."

While we feasted the strangers,  
the city hummed outside our doors,  
the buzzing of the hive, moving,  
agitating. Most people were like us  
busy with small schemes. Lot called  
our city wicked because he abhorred  
the men in it who loved men and the women  
who loved women, practices of love  
he held unclean, claiming  
Jews were different from other people.  
But our city was like any other city.  
And there were violent gangs of men  
who raped men, and that seemed to many  
especially horrible. When women were raped  
that was wrong, they said,  
but there was no special horror to it.  
Then came the screams of drunks,  
the obscene cries, the beating  
at our doors.

*And they called unto Lot,  
and said unto him, Where are  
the men which came in to thee  
this night? bring them out  
unto us, that we may know  
them.*

*And Lot went out at the  
door unto them, and shut the  
door after him,*

*And said, I pray you,  
brethren, do not so wickedly.*

*Behold now, I have two  
daughters which have not known  
man; let me, I pray you, bring  
them out unto you, and do ye to  
them as is good in your eyes:  
only unto these men do nothing;  
for therefore came they under  
the shadow of my roof.*

Dishonor and shame await those who  
behave dishonorably.  
We owed the guests at our table protection,  
that was the custom,  
but how could Lot offer  
our virgin daughters to the mob?  
He took the side of the angels—  
for so they later revealed themselves—  
or did he take the side of the men out there?

"Sweeney's regular plane, *The Great Artist*, named by  
the crew in honor of the bombardier's technique with a  
bombsight and the opposite sex, had already been  
outfitted with special instruments."

"Take my daughters, but not  
the strangers within my gates—,"  
words spoken with high seriousness.  
The house of Lot was only Lot,  
we were chattels and goods.  
We women were his animals to breed.  
Why didn't he offer himself to the men?  
The strangers smiled.  
They had their orders, and their secret  
knowledge: God was created in the image of man  
him only.  
The rape of women and children  
is sanctioned.  
Our lives were spared,  
because of Lot's godliness.

"... all had skin blackened by burns ... no hair ... at a  
glance you couldn't tell whether you were looking at  
them from in front or in back. They had their arms  
bent ... and their skin—not only on their hands but on  
their faces and bodies, too—hung down ... like  
walking ghosts they didn't look like people of this  
world."

We covered our heads,  
my weeping daughters and I, and ran  
with Lot and the strangers through the blinding  
light that tore  
and shattered and broke in a rain of fire and ash.

"I climbed Higiyama Mountain and looked down. I saw  
that Hiroshima had disappeared ... Hiroshima had  
become an empty field."

My neighbor was gone. I remembered her,  
worn with children, disagreeable,  
her harassed look, bent back,  
how she came one day when my daughter  
was sick, with a special broth.  
"Take it, it might help."

With every step my blood  
congealed with unshed tears;  
my body thickened.  
For what were we saved?  
To turn our backs on slaughter  
and forget? To worship  
the power that spared our lives?

Those who died are my children now,  
my other children, destroyed in the fire,  
neighbors, women and their young,  
the animals, the green of our simple  
gardens.  
How can I spit out  
the bitter root I gnaw, foraged from the rubble,  
more sour than the apple, the knowledge  
of what power rules our lives,  
the evil that knows but does not care,  
that values men at nothing, and women less,  
behemoth in love with death  
and willing, to that end, to extinguish  
even itself to celebrate its own spending?

The stench of flesh my skin breathes in  
cannot be washed away.  
What life could I have surviving  
the second's flash that revealed  
the sight of the world as it is?  
Scared and defiled, scorched  
and silenced, I turn back,  
refusing to live God's lies,  
and will my body, transfixed by grief,  
to rise in vigil  
over the ashen cities.

## KRISTINE BATEY (1951- )

*Lot's Wife*

While Lot, the conscience of a nation,  
 struggles with the Lord,  
 she struggles with the housework.  
 The City of Sin is where  
 she raises the children.  
 Ba'al<sup>6</sup> or Adonai<sup>7</sup> —  
 Whoever is God —  
 the bread must still be made  
 and the doorsill swept.  
 The Lord may kill the children tomorrow,  
 but today they must be bathed and fed.  
 Well and good to condemn your neighbors' religion;  
 but weren't they there  
 when the baby was born,  
 and when the well collapsed?  
 While her husband communes with God  
 she tucks the children into bed.  
 In the morning, when he tells her of the judgment,  
 she puts down the lamp she is cleaning  
 and calmly begins to pack.  
 In-between bundling up the children  
 and deciding what will go,  
 she runs for a moment  
 to say goodbye to the herd,  
 gently parting each soft head  
 with tears in her eyes for the animals that will not understand.  
 She smiles blindly to the woman  
 who held her hand at childbirth.  
 It is easy for eyes that have always turned to heaven  
 not to look back;  
 those that have been — by necessity — drawn to earth  
 cannot forget that life is lived from day to day.  
 Good, to a God, and good in human terms  
 are two different things.  
 On the breast of the hill, she chooses to be human,  
 and turns, in farewell —  
 and never regrets  
 the sacrifice.

6 Ba'al: Old Testament name for the chief god of the Canaanites whose cult practiced prostitution and child sacrifice. This cult was denounced by Jewish prophets. Adonai: Hebrew term for God.

A little late rain  
 the desert in the beauty of its winter  
 bloom, the cactus ablaze  
 with yellow flowers that glow  
 even at night in the reflected light  
 of moon and the shattered crystal of sand  
 when time was so new  
 that God still walked  
 among the tents, leaving no prints  
 in the sand, but a brand burned into  
 the heart—on such a night  
 it must have been, although  
 it is not written in the Book  
 how God spoke to Sarah  
 what he demanded of her  
 how many questions came of it  
 how a certain faith was  
 fractured, as a stone is split  
 by its own fault, a climate of extremes  
 and one last drastic change  
 in the temperature.

"Go!" said the Voice. "Take your son,  
 your only son, whom you love,  
 take him to the mountain, bind him  
 and make of him a burnt offering."  
 Now Isaac was the son of Sarah's age,  
 a gift, so she thought, from God. And how  
 could he ask her even to imagine such a thing—  
 to take the knife  
 of the butcher and thrust it  
 into such a trusting heart, then  
 light the pyre on which tomorrow burns.  
 What fear could be more holy  
 than the fear of *that*?

"Go!" said the Voice, Authority's own.  
 And Sarah rose to her feet, stepped out  
 of the tent of Abraham to stand between

*Sarah's Choice*

*The testing  
 of Sarah*

*Eleanor  
 Wilner*

*in No More*

*Masks!*

*Florence Howe,  
 ed.*

the desert and the distant sky, holding its stars  
 like tears it was too cold to shed.  
 Perhaps she was afraid the firmament  
 would shudder and give way, crushing her  
 like a line of ants who, watching  
 the ants ahead marching safe under the arch,  
 are suddenly smashed by the heel  
 they never suspected. For Sarah,  
 with her desert-dwelling mind, could  
 see the grander scale in which the heel  
 might simply be the underside of some Divine  
 intention. On such a scale, what is  
 a human son? So there she stood, absurd  
 in the cosmic scene, an old woman bent  
 as a question mark, a mote in the eye  
 of God. And then it was that Sarah spoke  
 in a soft voice, a speech  
 the canon does not record.

"No," said Sarah to the Voice.

"I will not be chosen. Nor shall my son—  
 if I can help it. You have promised Abraham,  
 through this boy, a great nation. So either  
 this sacrifice is sham, or else it is a sin.  
 Shame," she said, for such is the presumption  
 of mothers, "for thinking me a fool,  
 for asking such a thing. You must have known  
 I would choose Isaac. What use have I  
 for History—an arrow already bent  
 when it is fired from the bow?"

Saying that, Sarah went into the tent  
 and found her restless son awake, as if  
 he'd grown aware of the narrow bed in which he lay.  
 And Sarah spoke out of the silence  
 she had herself created, or that had been there  
 all along. "Tomorrow you will be  
 a man. Tonight, then, I must tell you  
 the little that I know. You can be chosen  
 or you can choose. Not both.

\* \* \*

*The  
 teachings  
 of Sarah*

The voice of the prophet grows shrill,  
He will read even defeat as a sign  
of distinction, until pain itself  
becomes holy. In that day, how shall we tell  
the victims from the saints,  
the torturers from the agents of God?"

"But mother," said Isaac, "if we were not God's  
chosen people, what then should we be? I am afraid  
of being nothing." And Sarah laughed.

Then she reached out her hand. "Isaac,  
I am going now, before Abraham awakes, before  
the sun, to find Hagar the Egyptian and her son  
whom I cast out, drunk on pride,  
God's promises, the seed of Abraham  
in my own late-blooming loins."

"But Ishmael," said Isaac, "how should I greet him?"  
"As you greet yourself," she said, "when you bend  
over the well to draw water and see your image,  
not knowing it reversed. You must know your brother  
now, or you will see your own face looking back  
the day you're at each other's throats."

She wrapped herself in a thick dark cloak  
against the desert's enmity, and tying up  
her stylus, bowl, some dates, a gourd  
for water—she swung her bundle on her back,  
reached out once more toward Isaac.  
"It's time," she said. "Choose now."

"But what will happen if we go?" the boy  
Isaac asked. "I don't know," Sarah said.  
"But it is written what will happen if you stay."

*The  
unbinding  
of Isaac*

[1989]

WANDA COLEMAN, 1938—

## WOMEN OF MY COLOR

i follow the curve of his penis  
and go down

there is a peculiar light in which women  
of my color are regarded by men

being on the bottom where pressures  
are greatest is least desirable  
would be better to be dead i  
sometimes think

there is a peculiar light in which women  
of my race are regarded by black men

as saints  
as mothers  
as sisters  
as whores

but mostly as the enemy

it's not our fault we are victims  
who have chosen to struggle and stay alive

there is a peculiar light in which women  
of my race are regarded by white men

as exotic  
as enemy

but mostly as whores

it's enough to make me cry  
but i don't

following the curve of his penis  
i go down

will i ever see  
the sun?

[1979]