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 (Hibakusha), 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—
face had and polished—the light couldn't enter them, it fell away, baffled.
But Lot was impressed by their authority, he loved authority, lived 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 or targets 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…""I saw the strangers look at our daughters not as men look at women but as we might look at dumb brutes—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, ignoring. 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 drunk, 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.

from Early Revelers
*Maor Pierce* ed.
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 Avarice, named by
the crew in honor of the bombardier's technique with a
bomb sight 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
born 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 one
and shattered and broke in a rain of fire and ash.

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

My neighbor was gone. I remembered her,
wrinkled, disagreeable,
hairless, 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 latter root I gnaw, forged 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
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, scathed
and silenced, I turn back,
returning to live God's life,
and will my body, transfixed by grief,
so rae in sight
over the ashed cities.
KRISTINE BATEY (1931— )

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.
Belial or Adonai—
Whatever is God—
the bread must still be made
and the doormat 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 commune with God
she rocks 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 dreading what will go,
she runs for a moment
to say goodbye to the herd,
gently petting 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 as childbed.
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.

A Belial: Old Testament name for the chief god of the Canaanites whose cult promoted immor-
tality and child sacrifice. This cult was denounced by Jewish prophet: Joshua: 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
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 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."