The Barrenness of Sarah

“Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon: ...when the Egyptians shall see thee, that they shall say, This is his wife: And they will kill me...Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister: that it may be well with me for thy sake.”
--Genesis 12: 11-13

Pharaoh took me to his house.
A danger to be thought so fair.
Old women their fathers sold
when they were young, bathed me
in water heated by the sun,
soothed my breasts and thighs
with petals bruised for beauty--
lotus, asphodel, pomegranate.
How gentle these women
with my skin, how dark their fingers.

Smaller than Abraham
and sad-eyed, Pharaoh lay
so light upon me I seemed
to rise, what stayed below,
a shadow, moving. In his cries
I heard the howl of plagues
let loose like heaven’s hounds,
then their rattling on locust wings
across the city. His people dying
one by one, Pharaoh called to Abraham,
What hast thou done?
Why didst thou call her sister?

My body riven, Abraham rode me
south to Bethel, he rich with Pharaoh’s gold for his one god, the fattest cattle,
she-asses and camels about to birth.
In my womb I felt a quickening, Egypt craving life. Each day I took a poison
as the women of my tribe for centuries have done to kill the little fish inside.

Within a week what finned and flickered
died. I had to drag myself from darkness,
wipe the venom from my mouth.
Others did not survive--my aunt,
my younger sister, my mother's friend
buried at the river's bend, unborn babies
curled beneath their hearts.

Abraham denied me one more time.
It was written Abimelech, King of Gerar,
did not touch me. Three nights
he drew aside the curtains of my bed.
I knew I'd die from poison.
Instead I bit on leather, pounded
my belly with a sack of stones
until the blood swam out of me.
We left his land with sheep and oxen,
my husband's pouches heavy with
a thousand silver pieces, pitiless price.

I was ninety when the Lord
told Abraham I would conceive.
Scolded for my laugh I laughed again
when the angels visited my tent,
Isaac's seed a spark that flashed
from them to me, my womb
burned new as any girl's
as if it did not hold those old deaths
sharp as hooks, bent and carved
from the smallest bones.

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