

Excerpt from Ishmael:

[Chapter 1: BEFORE DAWN]

I am an artist of becoming others--things, beasts, people, princes. What follows is my art, that of Ishmael, inventor.

We were put into the desert before dawn, and Prince Abraham turned away without a word, he and a dozen of his armed servants black in the woolly blackness; we heard the camels' coughing, a creak of harness, and they were gone. Hagar stood to one side sobbing loudly, hoping that the noise would move my father; but the Egyp hadn't a real tear in her, and in any case we were already alone.

I play a game with my father, and he joins me in it. We pretend that we are not known to each other--that the things we feel are unknown. He is a prince.

"Here, just let me sit down with you a moment in your tent," I say in my mind. "I want to rest first."

"No, we must go now." Nothing in his voice, no question. He meant to take advantage of the cool hours.

"Then let me obey with speed and help harness the beasts."

"No, no. Stay with me."

He put an arm across my shoulders and kissed my cheek.

"Only let me obey you."

As a matter of fact we had been silent, and he had not touched me. I addressed the night:

"Good-bye, Father Abraham."

I did not speak aloud, and of course he could not reply. Now I recall that hot day at Annex of Arad with my brother Isaac in state under a blue canopy in the market place and my drunkenness. I honor Isaac more than myself, more than my mother. Look at the round arms and good hands: a ruler's; look into the sweet cavern, his mouth, at the wise tongue; and here where his life is beating. I adore it. "I will give my brother a kiss."

You must ask Ishmael about love if you want to know.

Hagar was "praying."

"Hear me, oh Lord!" she said in her dry way. She could move you to nothing but astonishment.

"Whom are you talking to?"

Emptiness and silence.

"I suppose tears are good for something--a mother's tears? It's a comfort to know in any case that you are here with me, to recall you to your promise."

I was to be a king and the father of twelve princes.

"What's wrong? Can't he hear you? Give his beard a good pull and he'll listen."

Emptiness

So it was that before dawn on a day in the season of the first-ripe figs Prince Abraham put Ishmael into the wilderness of Beersheba with Hagar, his mother; and while she harasses God he sits in the empty bowl of silence, which is the earth.