

14 I am a wanderer. The soles of my feet are yellow with callouses, my body is lean and muscled, my brown face is polished by the sun and wind. It is the changing seasons that are my constancy. I and my people are always on the move. We drive our sheep and goats along in front of us, as we trek from one watering hole to the next. We butcher them for our food, make cheese from their milk, and our tents and bed-coverings from their hides.

We travel through the wilderness, seeking water. A parched riverbed spells death, an oasis life. Always in my mind I carry the image of the shimmer of light on a deep pool, green grass at its edge. Fresh water trickling over my dry tongue, loosening it to prayers and songs. My life is a long thirst.

Linked together by our need for water, my people are also linked by blood, the ties of kinship which separate us from the other nomads wandering this harsh world. Blood is spilled when we defend our claim to pitch camp at a particular watering hole, a particular spring. We slaughter our animals with clubs and knives. We kill our enemies. We offer blood sacrifices of lambs and kids. Our people are stern with wrongdoers. Robbers and murderers, who add to the weight of suffering we carry, have their hands cut off, are stoned to death.

Blood also separates women from men. When my monthly bleeding begins, my mother gives me a bundle of rags and tells me to sew them to make my bandages. I sit and do it so proudly, outside, where anyone can see me, my father, my brothers, my uncles. My mother hits me and hits me.

I am afraid of growing older, of the years of hardship stretching ahead, of a painful death that will perhaps come

early. I tell no one this. There is no point.

I accept leaving my people and being given to Jack as his wife. He watches me from behind a tree one day, when I sit in the shade of a rock and wash fleeces. I pretend not to notice his eyes running over me, measuring my strength, my youth, as I swirl the heavy wool in the green water at my knees. I know him: his route has often crossed ours.

He is kind to me. He does not beat me. He is anxious that I stay with him, for his children have been killed by thieves, and his wife has run away into the desert, crazed by grief. He wants more sons. When I bear him three in five years, he treats me with respect. In bed at night he becomes more gentle, less desperate, and I start to like being with him there. He says it is our duty, that his God wishes it, and I certainly don't mind.

Raising our children, preparing and cooking our food, making blankets and clothes, caring for our livestock, all this carries me through my life. I cradle my sons, one by one, in my arms, then have to let go of them, slap them into shape, watch them grow. Not exactly pleasure but a sort of satisfaction arrives for me out of my work. I am creating the survival not just of myself but also of my children. So far I am winning against the cruel nature stalking us with the threat of death. And so I gain the courage to go more deeply into my life, and start to feel less afraid, more capable, more powerful. I start to reflect on the world around me through concentrating intently on whatever it is that I am doing. I flow out of myself and become pot, hide, fish, earth, leaf. I worship the creation of the world day by day by letting myself become part of it, by working. God is in my hands as they scrub, wring, knead, scour, caress, sew, carve. I act, I create, and God pours through me. At these times I am not-myself, I go into a strange country. Sometimes I come to with a shock, to find myself kneeling, my forehead bowed to the ground.

When Jack catches me at my wild prayers one day he is worried I have fallen ill. I reassure him, but after that he watches me secretly, not wanting a second wife to lose her wits.

For Jack God is different. He is a mighty father in the sky, who punishes us when we do wrong, and sends us diseases and plagues and famines to show us his power. I can't understand

why that's necessary when the terrible beauty of God shimmers as close to us as the raindrop on the end of a twig, burns in the grass. You only have to sit still and *see*.

Jack walks and talks with his God. Sometimes, in the evening, at sunset, he goes off out of sight and stays away for a whole night. In the morning he comes back and announces that we have to offer a sacrifice or else we're in trouble. It's confusing for the boys, I think, Jack telling them one thing and me another. As they grow older, though, they decide to follow their father's example.

- What does your God look like? I ask Jack.

- I don't *see* him, he replies: he's too magnificent for that. I hear his voice sometimes, like the ringing of cymbals and harps and trumpets. Or he comes veiled in a golden mist, like the smoke of a heavenly fire. He wraps himself in the clouds and holds the sun in front of his face. His eyes are stars. And yet he is greater than all of these. His splendour is so great that if I looked at him I would surely die.

Jack's God is up, and mine is down. That seems to be one of the differences between the two. I wonder whether there are in fact two Gods, and whether they know each other. I wonder whether without knowing it Jack and I worship the same God. I don't think of God as a person but I might be wrong. My God is all over the place. I keep tripping over God at the oddest times, and not always in secret holy places or when I am by myself. Sometimes God is in bed with us.

- There is only one God, Jack repeats to me: and he lives beyond the sun and the moon and the heavens and sees everything we do and wants us to obey him and love him and behave properly.

- Well then, I reply: he'd be pleased, I'm sure, if you gave me a hand with the milking.

I have a picture in my mind of Jack's God as out to get us. Ready with his thunderbolts. He frightens me. Whereas when I meet my God in the middle of doing something ordinary I am flooded with happiness like sweet fresh milk. Jack says mine is a childish vision. I am not sure.

Time passes. My sons reach manhood, and take wives. I slow down a little, stop counting the silver strands in my black hair,

feel restless. When my monthly bleeding lessens and then finally stops, I feel like a girl again, skinny and nimble. I am not sad. I rule over three fine sons and their wives. Jack and I still make merry at night. But I catch myself thinking: so what now?

One night I have a dream. The earth appears to me as a woman groaning and arching in labour. She twists her hands in the tops of trees, which are her hair, and bites hard on the mountains, which are her arms, while her belly shakes, threatening earthquakes. Her waters breaking are a great flood. For nine months she has carried the seed of new life safely inside her, letting it float on her waters. Now it rushes out on a flood-tide of water and blood, while she heaves and shouts. And then the waters subside, and the waves are stilled, and the new child lies on her breast.

In the morning I tell Jack my dream. He is troubled by it, and goes off at evening to commune with his God. On his return he is white-faced and shaking.

- A great disaster is on the way, he tells me: God has warned me that he is about to destroy the world. People are so wicked that he is sorry he ever created us. There will be a great flood, and the whole race of mankind will be wiped out.

That night I have a second dream. This time the earth again appears to me as a pregnant woman, but this time at the beginning of her pregnancy. Inside her womb she holds the whole of creation, all forms of life dancing and growing within her. Jack and I and our children are there too, swimming on the waters inside her belly until we are ready to be born.

In the morning I again tell Jack my dream. Again, he is troubled by it.

- If your God is serious, I say: and he really intends to destroy us all with a great flood, we could escape if we built a boat with a roof. A house that could float. These tents would be no use in a really bad storm, they're far too flimsy. But a covered wooden shelter that could go with the storm and ride it, that might save us.

- I'll go and ask God what he thinks, Jack says.

He comes back next morning.

- God is willing for us to be saved, he announces: since we are less wicked than the rest of mankind. What we have to do is

to build a big wooden Boat with a roof and go into it with our sons and their wives and all our animals and livestock. That way we can see it through.

That was *my* idea, not your God's, I think. But I hold my tongue. This isn't the time for a quarrel.

Building the Boat is a real problem. Jack is handy at building sheds and cages for the animals, of course, and fences around our tents, since whenever we settle anywhere we always make ourselves secure against winds and robbers and storms. Our buildings, such as they are, are light, being woven of saplings and plastered with mud. Similarly, our rafts, whenever we settle for a time near a river or a lake and want to catch fish, are simple light craft, woven from lashed saplings like floating carpets.

We scratch pictures, in the dust, arguing. In the end we copy the shape of the closed earthenware pot we use for baking fish in the fire.

The people camped nearby help us. We pay them in sacks of wool. They laugh at us as they work. They declare that they would rather die than be shut up in a wooden box. They are used to the touch of wind and sun on their faces, and they are frightened of the dark. In the end I hold my peace, just thinking: they'll be glad enough to be saved when the time comes.

First of all we build the skeleton of the Boat, a spine with ribs arching above and below, and then we fit curved planks over it, making a large door in one side and rows of windows high up under the eaves of the roof. We paint over the entire vessel with a special waxy paint we make from tree resins mixed with egg white.

Inside we construct three tiers, the lowest one of stables and cattle sheds, the middle one of poultry houses and bird-cages, and the top one of living quarters for us. I paint the walls of our rooms with pictures of the world we are about to leave. I dip my brush in the pigments I have mixed from berry juices and earth and I paint tents and water pots, the sun rising over the purple mountains, the flowers waving in the grass. I think that perhaps the Boat will be our burial place, our coffin, and so I also paint pictures of people dying, falling sick, drowning. To give myself courage. I lay our best rugs on the deck, and hang

others on the walls, and I bring in our mattresses and pillows and cushions. I stack cooking utensils in a corner, and I help my three daughters-in-law carry in sacks of dried fruits, grains and flour, casks of oil, barrels of water.

When all is done, we gather on the riverbank and pray. Jack kills a lamb and offers a sacrifice, calling on God to be our good shepherd and take care of us, his faithful flock. The smell of the blood turns my stomach, and so I look away towards the green weeds under the fast-flowing river, the sand and rocks at its edge, the bushes and grasses dry and dazzling in the sunshine. I pray too, keeping my eyes averted from the bowl of blood at Jack's feet and putting my fingers in my ears so that I can't hear the sizzling of the burning lamb. Then I crouch down on the dust of the earth and commit us to her care, begging her not to be barren but to deliver us, to bring us through.

Then I pack my own private goods: my best linen robe, my blue eyelid paint, a bracelet of shells, a game of spillikins, a basket of embroidery threads. At the last minute I stuff a basket full of herbs, flowers and vegetables, I am not quite sure why, and then I am ready.

The weather changes. Violent storms by night, sticky heat by day. The earth is shaken by tremors stronger than we have ever experienced before, and the big mountains to the west begin to smoke a little. It is a sign. We know it, even before God tells Jack it is time to board the Boat. God is scolding and impatient, urging Jack to get a move on before it is too late.

Then the rain begins to fall, and does not stop.

We visit all our neighbours in turn, begging them to join with us. They sit tight in their tents and refuse to budge. They have never seen weather like this, they admit, but they see no reason to believe it won't clear. They can't hear God speaking the way Jack does, so they have no inkling of what is going to happen and don't believe Jack when he tells them. In the end we leave them. I am sick at heart, but I can't see what else we can do.

In the afternoon of that day an arch of colours appears in the sky, a bridge between heaven and earth. It twinkles in the rain, with the sun behind it, like strings of polished stones. One end of it touches the roof of the Boat and the other is hidden in the grey clouds.

- It is a rope, I declare, gazing at it: with God holding the other end. We shall be safe.

Jack goes off to ask God what it is all about.

-It's a sign, he says on his return: that God won't let go of us. He is our father, and he has put the arch of colours in the sky to show us that he will save us. It's a sort of heavenly rope.

- That's just what I said, I retort: your God is just copying me.

Jack goes as pale as sour milk.

- Don't blaspheme, he cries: or you'll be cursed and thrown off the Boat.

He looks so fierce that I decide to keep my opinions to myself. Two of my daughters-in-law are whimpering and blubbering with fear, and I relieve my feelings by turning on them and telling them to be quiet. Sara, my third daughter-in-law, tosses her head at me, and I slap her, I am that upset.

In one way I'm not at all sorry to have to go on board the Boat. I am fed up with hardship, with cleaning and cooking and scraping a living, with the constant battle against flies and dirt and illness. Don't ever let someone try and convince you that living close to nature in tents in the open is some sort of picnic. It's not. Either we are wading through seas of mud when it rains, or we are being bitten to death by insects when it's hot. The milk is always going off, and the tents leak, and I am forever washing and tidying and mending, forever making do, always trying to keep my self-respect by keeping a nice home. What for? I think to myself sometimes: why bother?

Sometimes I dream of running away, just going off and leaving them all to it. On my own I could live as I like, eating when I want to, skipping meals if I feel like it, sleeping and getting up when I want. Sex? What you don't have you don't miss. I know how to give myself pleasure, anyway. Sometimes that's all that's necessary, the quick solitary hand up the skirt and as many shudders of ecstasy as you feel like.

What I really want is a Boat of my own. I want to sail off all by myself, to abandon myself to the seas and the winds and go exploring, with no worry about where I will end up. But Jack thinks it's our duty to save the world; we have to try and entice all our neighbours on board, let alone our family and all the animals. He won't hear of our building two Boats, and I can't build my own without his help. So I have to drop my plan and

go along with his.

We fight about which animals to take.

- The fewer the better, I say: who'll clean out their pens and cages? Me, of course. So let's leave most of them behind.

Jack is horrified. He's a kind man, and he can't bear to think of our cattle drowning.

-No, he insists: we must take two of each sort, so that we can mate them afterwards and be sure of a renewed stock.

-Just like us, one man and one woman? I say: we've done our mating. By your logic we're too old to be saved. We should just put the youngsters on board. And let's not forget to take as many nasty creepy-crawlies as possible, two cockroaches and two mosquitoes and two spiders and two fleas.

What a strange way to live, I suddenly think to myself: couples couples couples. I want to live on my own.

I shut up about all this because Jack is getting upset. But when the heavy rains come, and turn into the Flood, I feel relieved. More than that: I am excited and pleased. The world is getting washed and scoured and rinsed for the very last time, and then God pours it all away with the dirty water, as sick of it all as I am. The world is a stack of pots I shall never have to scrub again. I enjoy the prospect of destruction. I don't get on to the Boat feeling like one of God's elect, some sort of holy being. I am escaping from a life that wearies me.

The noise, once we are on board and have shut the big wooden door, is terrific. The animals down below are bellowing in misery, not used to being cooped up in such a small space, and the birds are squawking as though they are being torn to pieces. They quieten down a bit after we feed them, but it makes me realize how difficult the voyage is going to be. I don't want to think of it.

None of us sleeps that night. Jack pretends he does, to set the rest of us an example, but I can tell he is awake because he isn't snoring. I lie listening to the rain drumming on the roof, and think about the neighbours we have left outside. Just before dawn the swollen river bursts its banks and takes us and sets us free with a great lurch and a bump. Trapped in the dark, we all shriek and hold on to each other, while the animals below set up their noise again.

When morning comes, Jack and I decide to climb out on to

the flat space we have left, as a sort of observing post, on the roof of the Boat, to see what can be seen. The moment we open the trap door we are drenched. We give up the idea of climbing out any further and just stick our heads out into the gale.

There is nothing there. The world has vanished. All around us, as far as I can see, straining my eyes in every direction, are the waters of the Flood. I can't see where sky ends and water begins. The horizon, if there is one, is grey mist. The Boat is a child's toy made of straw, bobbing helplessly up and down on the waves. I peer downwards, thinking of my neighbours with the water first creeping into their mouths and then filling them up. They are below us now, sinking down onto a cold bed. We have not heard their cries in the night.

For the rest of that day, and the next one, we slump in despair, only rousing ourselves to feed the poor beasts below and to swallow a bite ourselves. We fall sick with guilt and remorse. The will to survive leaves us, just as we have deserted our neighbours. The tides of the Flood enter my soul and drown me too. Welcome, death, I say to myself: I am no better than the slayers of animals I used to despise.

My daughter-in-law Sara saves us. I do not like her much, have never done. She has a sharp way of looking and speaking which bothers me, especially when I think it is aimed at me. She is a restless girl, bitter and dissatisfied, and she never bothers to hide how she feels. I am angry with her when I remember my own struggles, as a young woman, to become a good wife and mother, to put up with Jack's ways, to learn to suffer in silence. Sara makes me remember these things which I would rather forget. When I explain to her the best method of making yoghurt, or bread, she looks at me with a sort of veiled insolence, her hands demurely clasped but mockery darting from her eyes. I dread that look of hers, so I speak sharply to her always, just to keep her in her place. My other two daughters-in-law cause me no such trouble, but they are no company either, with their meek and mild ways. Sara, for all her sauciness, at least has a mind of her own.

On the third day she saves us.

- Mother, she says to me, giving me that awful sly look of hers: you didn't shut the trap door properly when you came back down from the roof, and it's leaking. Just look at the mess

on the floor.

I jump up scolding. Seizing a rag, I begin to swab the puddle I am sitting in, and then Jack groans and get up too, and re-closes the trap door and makes it properly fast. Then I realize that I am both hungry and thirsty.

- Come on, Sara says: I'll make you something to eat. A real meal. And you can tell me whether I'm doing it the right way.

She feeds us. She kicks us out of our gloom, and goads us back into living. Every time she sees us ready to drop back into weakness, she mocks us back onto our feet. We dislike her for it, but it works. She organizes us. She makes us all take turns, Jack and my three sons included, in preparing our food and feeding the animals, in clearing up afterwards, in washing our dishes and clothes.

- This is women's work, not men's, Jack and my sons protest: this is the end of civilization as we know it.

- That's right, Sara says: if you want to survive, do it.

Sara becomes our leader. She is mother and father to all of us. A strict parent, always ready with the whip of her tongue. We know that without her we would die.

Time passes, passes. Days, weeks, months.

Sara looks less restless and dissatisfied. Nowadays she walks about with lighter steps, humming, and sometimes she sits with me in the afternoons when all the others are asleep, and we talk. We mellow a little towards each other, recognizing our need for one another. I notice how she is beginning to stand in a new way, with her belly thrust a little forwards and her hands resting on it. She has a new smile, very different from her old one. Still secretive, but pleased.

- You'll have to take things a bit easier, I remark to her one morning while we are forking filthy straw out of the sheep pen: with the baby coming. Save some-strength for him.

She turns scarlet.

- I didn't think it showed yet.

Then she looks at me in her old way.

- How do you know it won't be a daughter? That's what I want. A daughter. If it's a boy I'll throw it over the side.

I am shocked. She looks down, and I am shocked again to see that she is crying. I can't bear this. I have never been able to endure the sound of my children crying. Something tiny and

monstrous and dark within me wakes up and joins in, and then I have to slap it back down, slap the children to stop them crying. I hold my hands together in my lap, itching to slap Sara as she goes on weeping, her face ugly and red, and that terrible sound coming from her.

- You didn't welcome a daughter, did you? she says: you were happy with your three fine sons, and you've never thought much of the worth of daughters-in-law.

We spread the clean straw on the floor of the pen in silence. Then, exhausted, I sit down in it to rest. I want to tell Sara to go away, but I'm unable to do so. She sits down beside me. I fear her now. She is my accuser, my judge.

- When I came to live with you all, she says: I was so lonely. I missed my people so much I could hardly bear it. I wanted my husband to love me and to be loved by him, but he took little notice of me. Except at night when he would climb on top of me for a few minutes and then fall asleep. All day long it was nothing but work work work. I wanted kindness from you but you kept scolding me. Everything I did was wrong. I felt stupid and useless. So I gave up trying.

I am struck by how young she is. Younger than I when I married Jack. Cautiously I grope my way back to that time and try to remember what it was like. I expected so little. That was what saved me from too much sorrow.

- What about God? I ask her: isn't God a comfort?

- I don't believe in him, she says: I want my mother.

She starts crying again. I want to shake her. I stop myself, and take her hand. I expect her to withdraw it, but she doesn't.

- We had a song, my sisters and I, she sobs: handed down from one of our ancestors who was stolen away into captivity and made to marry her captor. She sang how she was as lonely as a water lily whose stem is gnawed by a beetle. That was how I felt. Living with your son, before the Flood came, I used to sing it to myself every day, for comfort.

She blows her nose on her sleeve and looks at me defiantly.

- I want a daughter, she says: I'll love her properly. The way no one loves me. And then I'll let her go. I'll let her leave me. I know it's got to happen.

She's on the verge of tears again. I can't bear it. I search hurriedly for something to say that will stop her.

- You're my daughter now, Sara, I say: please stay with me.

We haven't any choice, anyway, I think. We just have to make the best of it. But I promise her in my heart: you have looked after me, and now I will try to look after you.

We begin to rely on each other in a new way. Sara is someone I can really talk to. Jack is depressed, and isn't much good to me. He doesn't tell me his thoughts in the old way, and he stops coming to me at night. I miss him.

- What's your God thinking about things? I ask him one day.

His face grows even more miserable.

- I can't hear what God's saying any more, he confesses: there's too much water in the way.

I find this odd. To my way of seeing we are surrounded by Jack's God. I believe in his power and anger as never before. Whereas my God seems to be sleeping or dreaming. I have to take it on trust that the earth will deliver us again out of her womb. There is no sign I can see that this will be so.

We have to wait. We have to be patient. It isn't easy to stay cooped up in a small space with the fear of death tapping at your shoulder night and day, after a lifetime of running about outside and going pretty well where you want.

We remain in the Boat for nine months in all; for the length of a pregnancy. When we are not working we sit and gossip, or we play at spillikins, or we try to pray. I embroider linen for the new baby, or I just sit in silence. That feels good.

I need nothing now but this water surrounding us.

I develop eyes of piercing vision, capable of seeing down through the wooden hull of the Boat, through the fathoms of ocean underneath us, right down to the stones and gravel and sand that once formed the earth, the dry land. I build a new world there, one of my own choosing. A childish vision, idealistic, impossible. I know that. I fill it with people who are as fluid as water, flowing past each other in peace and letting each other alone.

My world allows people to choose how they will live: by themselves, or in groups, or with one other person. People are allowed to be flexible, to change, to change how they live. There are no rules about having to get married and have

children, having to leave your mother if you don't want to, having to live with a man if you don't want to. In this deep-sea place Sara and I can keep house together, and no one minds. I give us fins on our backs and tails, like fish, and I build us a cool cave decorated with coral and shells, with a floor of silver sand, and green weeds waving around the entrance. The water slides all over my body as I lie in it and am carried along by it. Water is my mother, my lover, my bed. My element, which gives me the Freedom to swim off wherever I want to go. Water is my food and drink. Water is my god.

I've had enough of being a woman, with being confined in a clumsy body, with being defined by men. Yearning and suffering and dying on the harsh earth. Just as when I am a child I yearn to escape upwards and join the birds in their airy element, when I pretend I can fly, so now, as an adult woman, I am reborn from the Boat into water. I become fish. Untroubled by the Flood, which, after all, is merely my home. I go with it.

We carve a tally of the days we spend afloat, using Jack's knife to notch slashes in the doorpost. Every morning one of us marks the wood in this way, while someone else peers out through the trap door to see what the weather is like. We invent a lot of new words for different sorts of rain.

After nine months have passed it stops raining. We look at one another. Without saying a word, Jack goes down to the middle deck and fetches out a raven and a dove. Opening one of the casements he lets them go. That evening, only the dove returns. It bears a sprig of olive in its beak.

Next morning, when we wake up, we find that we have been put ashore in the night. Perhaps Jack's God has pulled us from above and mine has pushed us from below. I don't know. But here we are, wedged between two enormous rocks. At first, looking out of the trap door, we assume we have landed on an island. Then, when we emerge, we discover that we are balanced on the tip of a mountain. Fancy that, I think: a Boat on a mountain-top. How ridiculous. I start laughing so hard I can't stop. Not until Sara shakes me. Then I begin to weep.

We clamber out of the Boat onto dry land. There, shining above us in the grey sky, is the arch of colours. A thin sun

glimmers behind the clouds, and the air on our faces is fresh and damp. Way down below us we can see the tops of trees.

The waters, ebbing and receding from the mountain, have left a trail of litter. The rocky ground is sticky with slimy green debris, rotten vegetation. Bones, clotted with lumps of hair and gristle, poke up out of it. Here and there are the corpses of men and animals, bloated and stinking, whose rotting flesh has turned all manner of bright colours, as though it reflected the arch of light above.

How does a baby feel when it is born, propelled from the safety of the enclosing waters into the enormous dry world? Beside me Sara is being sick all over her feet.

I want to go back on the Boat. I don't want to see the ruin of the world, these scraps of clothing caught on the rocks, this broken baby's rattle a body's length away. Jack has his face turned away from mine. I know he is trying not to weep.

- Wife, he says, gripping my hand: we should offer a sacrifice. Go and fetch a lamb from the Boat.

- No, I say.

I point at the band of colours hanging over our heads. One end hides in the clouds, and the other touches the roof of the Boat, just as before.

- The earth is a hard mother, I say: but she has delivered us, just as I dreamed she would, and we've been born onto this mountain for good or ill. She will cut that shining cord in her own good time. When she does, it's up to us to get on with living. There is no need to kill an animal. I want no more death.

Jack stares at me, his face wretched and uncomprehending. Then his shoulders sag.

- I can't bear this. I'm going off to find a clean place in which I can pray.

He blunders off, crying.

The rest of us bury the dead. We dig one large shallow grave as best we can, and roll the bodies into it, then cover them with earth and stones. A little way down the mountain we find a big puddle of water. In silence, we strip off our filthy clothes and wash ourselves, all of us going in together. It doesn't seem to matter, that we show our exhausted naked bodies to one another. It is a kind of prayer for the dead, and for ourselves, to

pour scoops of water over each other's heads. It confirms us as a family, as survivors. Then we go back on the Boat to feed and water the animals, and to prepare a meal. It smells too bad outside to stay there for long. .

Jack comes back after dark. My sons and daughters are eating supper, but I can't touch a thing. The meat stew nauseates me. As though it were boiled up from dead babies.

Jack stands in our midst and raises his hands, palms upwards.

- God has spoken to me, he announces: he is very terrible, but he is also merciful. He is our shepherd, and he has brought us here, through the waters of the Flood, so that we may know his might and tremble before him. He has put the arch of colours in the sky as the sign of his pledge to us, of his new alliance with us. He wishes us to offer him burnt meat as a sacrifice, so that he may enjoy its pleasant odour. And he commands us to go forth and be fruitful and multiply. We shall become the masters of the earth, and hold sway over it. We have dominion over all the animals and birds, over all the fruits of nature, over the fish that swim in the seas. Everything that lives will serve us for food, and will tremble before us and be filled with fear at our approach.

- This way of talking is a disaster, I retort: what good can come of our setting ourselves up like lords? The animals have suffered just as much as we have, and have been reborn just as we have. It's wrong to make them our servants again. We need to treat them differently now. They are our companions, not our slaves.

- God has decreed it, is all Jack will say: as the rule of our new life.

I heave myself to my feet and raise my arms just as my husband has done.

- Then I too, I declare: have a rule for my new life. I swear that I shall never kill an animal again, shall never shed blood again, shall never eat meat again. I am sick of killing, and so would your God be if he had any sense.

This argument confirms the division between Jack and me. I still love and respect him. How can I not? We have come through so much together. But our opinions are leading us along different ways.

After supper, the others fall asleep. I stay up, unable to sleep for worrying about what will happen to us next. The wooden ceiling above my head shuts me into a space of sour breath and sweat, of torment. I open the trap door and clamber out onto the roof.

The cool evening wind has swept away the foul stench of the day, and the darkness has blotted out the ugly view. I sit cross-legged, the breeze fanning my face. I listen to the silence of the night and throw myself into its untouchable blue distances. I look up at the stars, my eyes walking amongst them, hopping from one to the other as though they are stepping stones. Perhaps we are not alone, after all. Perhaps there are other living creatures on those stars. Perhaps all this business of living and dying goes on all the time among the stars. The earth is only one place among so many.

Night has cut the bright cord, and set me upright. Now I need a name. I need names.

I decide to give the earth and all her creatures new names, as you do with a baby when it is born. I jump up, and begin to pace up and down on the roof. I think first of the arch of colours we have seen twice, once before the Flood and now after it. It links our new life to our old one, ties heaven to earth, knots us to God.

- God's bow in the rain, I call out: God's rainbow.

For the rest of the night I wrestle with words, trying to find new ones. The names are a string with which I tie together my understanding of the God I know in this new creation, my way of connecting us all with each other and with God, humans and animals and birds and plants, none of us superior to the others however different we may look. Naming the names is a form of worship. I grow drunk on it.

- God's rainbow, I chant to myself: God's knot, God's promise, God's-not-forgetting, God-not-forgotten.

Also I mourn. This work of renaming includes contemplating all that I have lost: the old world with all its beauties and sorrows. The people we knew and travelled and laughed with. The drowned beasts. Also my hopes for a new and better world which would not include killing, the ruthless mastery of nature. Jack said to me before he slept: it is necessary to dominate nature in order to live from it; how, otherwise, shall we start

our new life and survive? I had no answer for him. I dream of a harmony between all created things, a state of peaceful growth, of unity and kindness and no killing. I know I shall not see it.

In the morning I take Sara aside and tell her I've renamed the world while she was asleep. She looks astonished at first, then worried.

- No, no, I'm not ill, I say: just listen, will you?

In the end, perhaps just to humour her crazy mother-in-law, she agrees to teach the new names to her baby once it is born. She is doubtful about how many she will be able to remember, when she's no longer looking at the things I've named, or should illness or death prevent my being there to remind her, and so I start thinking of a way to help her do it.

I go back in my mind to the time when we started building the Boat, how we drew pictures in the dust on the ground of what we thought we wanted.

I take dollops of wet mud in the palm of my hand, and shape them into little slabs. I sharpen the end of a stick into a point. Then, with the stick, I draw pictures on the mud slabs, one by one, of all the new words I've made up. I keep the pictures as simple as possible: a few strokes and curves. Some of them are just straightforward drawings of things, or part of a thing, as I see them in my mind's eye, like *bee*, or *leaf*. *God* is a circle. Then I work out I can use sound as well as sight. So *belief-in-God* comes out as a circle holding a bee and a leaf. I enjoy myself doing this, playing games again. An aged child I am, squatting on my haunches getting my hands all clotted with mud. When I've finished, I lay the slabs on the roof of the Boat to dry in the sun and grow hard. Then I collect them up in my apron and give them to Sara. And I give a name to what I've done: I call it *writing*.

- See, I show her: this mud brick is a *word*, and it means *my-love-for-you*. And it will replace me when I'm no longer with you. It will survive our separation. It will survive my death. This is my gift to you, daughter, and to your children and to their children.

I laugh at myself. I wanted to save and change the world, yet all I've been able to do is make up a new kind of toy.

That's more or less the end of my story. I decide to stay on the mountain-top and end my days there. It is no longer

unpleasant to me, now that the filth on the ground has been dried by the sun and wind and the bodies have been shovelled into the earth where they belong. I am filled with weariness. Perhaps I just lack the courage to struggle on. The weather is turning colder, and the others want to get down the mountain with the livestock and find shelter, found a settlement. No more wandering: we are all agreed on that. Sara wants a wooden house, like the Boat she's grown used to, not a flimsy tent, to shelter her baby in. She wants to stay in one place, to become a farmer, to plant the seeds we have brought with us, to see them grow. She wants crops, and a harvest, and a barn full of wheat, and an end to wandering.

So they leave me, as I ask. They build me a little hut near the Boat with a few provisions stored in it, and they tether a couple of goats nearby to keep me in milk and cheese. Then they take the rest of our goods and animals and move off down the mountain to find the place where they will build a home.

My parting with Sara is as sad as that with Jack. Both of us weep.

- I shall return and visit you very soon, Sara promises me as she embraces me: after the baby is born. I'll bring her with me.

I don't want to lose my newly found daughter so soon. I begin to love her, then have to tear her from me. She talks of staying with me, but I pack her off. I drive her away, using some of my old harshness, complaining that all I want now is to be left alone. I know it is right that she goes with her husband and family. Hers is the last human face that I see. She waves goodbye, then drops out of sight behind an outcrop of rock. What hope would she have, staying with me? That is what I say to myself when I find myself missing her.

A strange time begins for me. For the first time in my life I am free to do what I like all day long. My increasing weakness means that I can't get about very much, so I stick to my little patch of mountainside near the Boat. I like being surrounded by nothing but wind and sky. I sit for hours watching the changes in the clouds, the shifting of the light, the play of sunsets and dawns. Daily I witness the creation of the world. When I pray, it is not with words. When I talk, it is to praise God, by which I mean the action of creation. I don't try to

draw a picture of this. Sara will need to break the circle I drew in two, and find a new word. But I don't need words any more. I'm alone, and I've given my words to Sara, to do as she likes with.

I don't last long in my solitary retreat. Cold white pieces of sky fall down day by day, smoothing out my world, blotting out my thoughts. God's silence wraps me up, hushing me, putting an icy finger to my lips. I open my mouth and the whiteness of the sky falls onto my tongue, dissolving, pouring down my throat like sweet milk. Welcome, death. In you I drown. Until I'm reincarnated, born again into the next story. I'm the ghost in the library, cackling, unseen, from between the pages of the sacred texts, waiting my chance to haunt a new generation of readers. I'm what's missing. I'm the wanderer.